

Walking in London

The fiction of Neil Bartlett, Sarah Waters and Alan Hollinghurst

Writing missing voices of sexuality, class and gender back into history through re-imagining the city space.

Julie Cleminson

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Abstract

This thesis examines the fiction of Neil Bartlett, Sarah Waters and Alan Hollinghurst, considering how they write missing voices of sexuality, gender and class back into history through re-imagining the city space. It examines the ways in which traditional, linear narratives and the notion of objectivity in historical discourse are challenged when history is presented through fiction.

Waters, Bartlett and Hollinghurst are writing the past from the perspective of the late 20th and early 21st centuries, both employing and subverting traditional narrative genres. They all depict London as a symbolic, liminal space which allows for the voices of marginalized groups to flourish. Their London is a physical but also an imagined city, both grand and squalid, where the official boundaries between public and private space are often blurred.

Through depicting their protagonists mapping their own ways around London, the authors all disrupt and destabilize traditional accounts of past events and city dwellers, foregrounding the imagination in the re-telling of history's excluded stories.

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INTRODUCTION

Introduction

Break the narrative. Refuse all the stories that have been told so far (because that is what the momentum really is), and try to tell the story differently – in a different style, with different weights – and allow some air to those elements choked with centuries of use, and give some substance to the floating world.

Jeanette Winterson ¹

Sarah Waters, Neil Bartlett and Alan Hollinghurst are concerned with writing missing voices not only back into history but into the present, too. The voices have been confined to the footnotes of history because of their sexuality, gender, class or variations of all three. The writers rescue these voices from the margins and foreground them in their texts. They tell an unofficial history from ‘below’, validating the marginalized and the stories that grand narratives have traditionally excluded.

All three authors reclaim the London streets through fiction, de-centring traditional linear historical accounts and walking their characters back into history.

Mark Turner argues that conventional cultural histories have reduced queer² encounters to ‘notes and queries in the margin or unarticulated suggestions lingering in the mind. That is, at best. At least as frequently, the traces of queer experiences have been lost in history – written out completely – and forgotten in cultural memory.’³

¹ Jeanette Winterson, The PowerBook (London: Jonathan Cape, 2000) 53.

² There is considerable debate about the use of terminology such as “gay” and “queer” and applying such current terms to the past can be problematic. I have tried as far as possible to use the terms “lesbian” and “gay” to refer to sexual identity. However, the term “queer” is also used in conjunction with the ideas of theorists such as Mark Turner who argues that to “queer” history is to undermine and challenge the idea of “norms” within it.

³ Mark Turner, Backward Glances (London: Reaktion, 2003) 43.

Through depicting their protagonists mapping their own ways around London, the authors all disrupt and destabilize traditional accounts of past events and city dwellers. Multiple Londons are depicted in their work; liminal spaces offering the opportunities for transformation. In male attire, Waters' heroines swagger on stage in the city's music halls, idolized by women and men alike. They walk the Piccadilly streets dressed as men, highlighting the performativity of gender and the restrictions on women. Hollinghurst's characters map the underground worlds of bathhouses and cottages – 'fissures within the urban landscape'⁴ - important public/private city sites for the enactment of gay desire. Bartlett's heroes become players in fairytales, finally able to stroll slowly through the city, holding hands in public all night without fear of reprisals.

Mainstream history books have no space for the stories of the groups who people the work of Waters, Bartlett and Hollinghurst. The histories of lesbians, women, gay men and the working class were not considered worthy enough to be remembered for much of the twentieth century. Although their stories did appear in non-mainstream, gay and lesbian publications, the grand narrative disregarded what would have been considered 'immoral' or 'undesirable'. History was not about the *everyday* stories of men and women.

Barbara Kruger and Phil Mariani state that traditional history writing has been '...a bulky encapsulation of singularity, a univocal voice-over, an instructor of origin, power and mastery.'⁵ They describe a discipline of sequencing and ordering of events, with the

⁴ Matt Houlbrook, Queer London, Perils and Pleasures in the Sexual Metropolis, 1918-1957 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005) 49.

⁵ Barbara Kruger & Phil Mariani, ed. Remaking History (Seattle: Bay Press, 1989) ix.

emphasis on objectivity. The historian is ‘the worker of mute mouths’⁶, a ‘ventriloquist that balances corpses on its knee’.⁷ They portray a grotesque performance masquerading as ‘truth’.

However, Linda Hutcheon points out that an emphasis on objectivity was not always the case. In the early nineteenth century literature and history were accepted as ‘branches of the same tree of learning’⁸, with many common features. With the advent of the methods of German historian, Leopold von Ranke, however, history and literature became separated into two distinct disciplines.⁹

Ranke is often described as the originator of historical empiricism, a method built up in the 1830s. Simon Gunn describes his approach:

Ranke proposed a concept of historical knowledge predicated on analysis of the documentary record, scrupulous ascertaining of the historical facts about any events (‘what actually happened’) and an understanding that every period possessed its own unique essence or character. At the same time, each period was sequentially linked to that which succeeded it, so that history could be understood as a whole, an intelligible linear process connecting the past with the present.¹⁰

Ranke stated that the historian should move from presenting facts alone towards a universal view, focussing on their wider significance. His influence was great in the United States and

⁶ Barbara Kruger & Phil Mariani, ed. Remaking History (Seattle: Bay Press, 1989) ix.

⁷ Barbara Kruger & Phil Mariani, ed. Remaking History (Seattle: Bay Press, 1989) ix.

⁸ Linda Hutcheon, A Poetics of Postmodernism: history, theory, fiction. (London: Routledge, 1988) 105.

⁹ Linda Hutcheon, A Poetics of Postmodernism: history, theory, fiction. (London: Routledge, 1988) 105.

¹⁰ Gunn, Simon, History and Cultural Theory (Harlow: Pearson Education Ltd, 2006) 5.

the UK, whose establishment of history as an academic discipline in the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries fostered an ‘unwavering commitment to empirical method’ in its journey towards the ‘truth’.¹¹ According to Gunn, this approach prevailed in Britain for much of the twentieth century. Dominick La Capra reinforces this argument with the assertion that twentieth century historians have continued to ‘confide in a “documentary” or “objectivist” model of knowledge that is typically blind to its own rhetoric.’¹² With such a model, he writes:

The historical imagination is limited to plausibly filling gaps in the record, and ‘throwing new light’ on a phenomenon requires the discovery of hitherto unknown information. It does not mean seeing the phenomenon differently or transforming our understanding of it through reinterpretation. Indeed all sources tend to be treated in narrowly documentary terms, that is, in terms of factual or referential propositions that may be derived from them to provide information about specific times and places.¹³

He refers to the historian’s dream of ‘a total history’ and desire for control and ‘mastery of a documentary repertoire.’¹⁴ The problem with the emphasis on ‘facts’ and ‘objectivity’ is that this method will only legitimize stories that meet its own criteria in terms of evidence. Where are the illegitimate voices that are unrecorded because they do not fit the criteria?

¹¹ Gunn, Simon, History and Cultural Theory (Harlow: Pearson Education Ltd, 2006) 7.

¹² Dominick LaCapra, History & Criticism (London: Cornell University Press, 1985) 17.

¹³ Dominick LaCapra, History & Criticism (London: Cornell University Press, 1985) 18.

¹⁴ Dominick LaCapra, History & Criticism (London: Cornell University Press, 1985) 25.

The Rankean approach was echoed in the history taught in U.K. schools throughout the twentieth century. In a study of teaching methods in the UK, from 1900-90, David Sylvester writes:

History teaching in England, and to some extent in Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland, in the twentieth century has been dominated by what might be called a 'great tradition'. Its main features were fixed by 1900 and it remained largely unchanged for at least seventy years.¹⁵

Throughout most of the twentieth century, the history teacher's job was to instruct, to give pupils the 'facts' which they were to memorize. These 'facts' were about men and women and "a record writ large of their influence for good or evil". (13) Denied the tools to question traditional narratives, the students' role was passive. In 1927 the Board of Education's Handbook of Suggestions for Teachers concluded that History was for children 'pre-eminently an instrument of moral training'.¹⁶ There would have been no place for the history of lesbians and gay men here. In fact, apart from covering the lives of Elizabeth I, Queen Victoria and Florence Nightingale, the syllabus took little account of the lives of women at all.

A Report by the Board of Education in 1923 suggested that it would be useful for pupils to learn an alphabet of history consisting of thirty-two dates, involving mainly the births and deaths of kings, queens and dates of battles. This methodology remained broadly unchanged in the 1960s and 1970s, leaving little room for any sense of the importance of the history of

¹⁵ David Sylvester, "Change and Continuity in History Teaching 1900-93" Teaching History ed. Hilary Bourdillon (London: Routledge/Open University, 1994) 9.

¹⁶ David Sylvester, "Change and Continuity in History Teaching 1900-93" Teaching History ed. Hilary Bourdillon (London: Routledge/Open University, 1994) 9.

individual men and women and, moreover, with no room for any *imaginative* response to the subject. Kruger and Mariani observe:

If traditional history writing has been in a sense a process of collecting, it has also been a process of marginalizing, omitting. Still, it speaks *at* us, if not *to* us, with the authority of all discourses that seek to demonstrate cause and effect.¹⁷

This marginalization was highlighted by the Lesbian History Group who argued in their introduction to Not a Passing Phase:

Writing the history of women is difficult because in a patriarchal society (i.e. one organised in the interests of men) fewer sources concerning women exist and those that do have often been ignored as ‘unimportant’, or have been altered. The task of the feminist historian is first to rescue women from oblivion, and then to interpret women’s experience within the context of the society of the time.

This is also true for the lesbian historian. In her case, however, the problem of sources is magnified a thousandfold.¹⁸

In the title of his seminal 1961 work, E.H. Carr posed the question: What is History? He pointed out the difference between ‘chronicle’, a simple listing of events, and ‘history’, which tried to understand these events and their connections. He argued for the historian’s need for imaginative understanding, (though still assuming the historian to be male), maintaining: ‘History cannot be written unless the historian can achieve some kind of contact with the minds of those about whom he is writing.’¹⁹ Carr has been criticised since then for focussing

¹⁷ Barbara Kruger & Phil Mariani, ed. Remaking History (Seattle: Bay Press, 1989) ix.

¹⁸ Lesbian History Group, Not a Passing Phase: Reclaiming Lesbians in History 1840-1985 (1993. London: The Women's Press, 1989) 3.

¹⁹ E.H. Carr, What is History? (London: Penguin, 1990) 24.

too strongly on the history of the powerful²⁰, nevertheless, Richard J. Evans claims that ‘Carr struck a powerful chord with the radical student generation that was just emerging in the course of the 1960s.’²¹ History was exciting to the 1960s radical student generation, writes Evans:

...because it offered an explanation for the present and hope for the future. Revolutions and revolutionaries, rioters and rebels, labour movements, strikes and protests, radicals and recalcitrants, fighting the encrusted orthodoxies and oppressive authoritarianism of their day, were exciting figures to rediscover and identify with in the heady atmosphere of the 1960s.²²

Evans describes young historians entering the profession at this time, beginning work on fresh projects in social history using new concepts and methods.

These changes continued in the 1970s, in the wake of what Jeffrey Weeks calls: ‘the immense burst of energy produced by the emergence of second-wave feminism and the gay liberation movement.’²³ Political activism had begun to alter attitudes and values, if not immediately laws and structures. Weeks states that the politics and language of the feminist and Gay Liberation movements had their roots in the civil rights and anti-war campaigns and student

²⁰ For more on this argument see David Cannadine, ed. What is History Now? (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan Ltd, 2002) 3.

²¹ Richard J. Evans, “Prologue: What is History – Now” What is History Now? ed. David Cannadine (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002) 3.

²² Richard J. Evans, “Prologue: What is History – Now” What is History Now? ed. David Cannadine (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002) 3.

²³ Jeffrey Weeks, The World We Have Won (London: Routledge, 2007) 18.

organization of the late sixties: ‘...their impact in the early 1970s was dramatic because they shifted irreversibly the terms of the debates.’²⁴

The growth in awareness of social and women’s history paved the way for new lesbian and gay histories at the end of the 1970s. Laura Gowing argues that this change was strongly influenced by broader historical shifts:

...the development of a feminist historical practice, the growth of women’s history, gender history and black history, and the movement towards a new ‘history from below’ ... restores historical agency to those whose voices have traditionally been suppressed.²⁵

Although the documentation of nineteenth century lesbian lives is often hidden, lost or overlooked, a number of feminist historians and theorists such as Lillian Faderman have charted examples of lesbian life at this time.²⁶

A more tolerant climate was at last opening out the possibilities of creative approaches to history. From the 1970s alternative histories began to reclaim the stories of marginalized people and their cultures. Influential to this movement was the work of theoretician Michel Foucault, who interrogated the relationship between knowledge and power and questioned the construction of individual identity.

Instrumental in the challenge to history as a discipline, was History Workshop, a group that was started in 1967 and dedicated to making history a more democratic activity. It was in the

²⁴ Jeffrey Weeks, The World We Have Won (London: Routledge, 2007) 18.

²⁵ Laura Gowing, “History” Lesbian and Gay Studies, A Critical Introduction ed. Andy Medhurst & Sally Munt (London: Cassell, 1997) 53.

²⁶ I have explored Faderman’s work and influence in more detail in the chapters on Sarah Waters.

forefront of new ways of assembling and writing the past and, through meetings and publication of a regular journal, created a space for traditional forms of history to be interrogated. Its ethos was highly influential in the way that history would come to be viewed and in validating voices traditionally sidelined because of gender, class and sexuality. The editorial for the first edition of the journal asserts:

We believe that history is a source of inspiration and understanding, furnishing not only the means of interpreting the past but also the best critical vantage point from which to view the present. So we believe that history should become common property, capable of shaping people's understanding of themselves and the society in which they live.²⁷

History Workshop highlighted the importance of oral histories, too, championing the agency of individual stories. This was to be followed by the setting-up of many oral history projects, focussed particularly on working-class and gay and lesbian communities.²⁸ Jeffrey Weeks describes the importance of such projects:

Here were subjugated knowledges bursting into speech. Here were new claims to personal autonomy and sexual freedoms. Here were bodies and pleasures entering into political discourse. And here were new forms of politics disrupting the exhausted forms of post-war social democracy. Above all, as a library of testimonies underlines, there were the transformations of thousands, perhaps millions of individual lives.²⁹

The ethos of teacher-led instruction began slowly to change in the schools and colleges too, with a growth in the belief in inquiry as a model of teaching and learning. Pupils were to 'do' history, rather than merely receive it, engaging with and asking questions of the past.

²⁷ Janet Woolf, History Workshop Journal 1.1. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976).

²⁸ Two examples of this are The Hall Carpenter Archive of gay men's stories and Brighton Ourstory.

²⁹ Jeffrey Weeks, The World We Have Won (London: Routledge, 2007) 18.

In The Postmodern Condition, first published in 1979, Jean-Francois Lyotard wrote of a crisis in the standing of knowledge in Western societies. This manifested itself in what he referred to as ‘incredulity towards metanarratives’³⁰. He was referring to the apparent rejection of totalizing narratives, such as Christianity, Marxism or specific periodizations of history which organize and tell universalist stories. John Storey states that in many ways this was the book that introduced the expression ‘postmodern’ into widespread circulation. He writes:

According to Lyotard, metanarratives operate through inclusion and exclusion, as homogenizing forces, marshalling heterogeneity into ordered realms, silencing and excluding other discourses, other voices in the name of universal principles and general goals. Postmodernism is said to signal the collapse of all universalist metanarratives with their privileged truth to tell, and to witness instead the increasing sound of a plurality of voices from the margins, with their insistence on difference, on cultural diversity, and the claims of heterogeneity over homogeneity.³¹

Although stylistically varied, the novels of Waters, Hollinghurst and Bartlett are imbued with this philosophy, with their use of non-linear narrative, intertextuality and multiple narrative voices.

French cultural theorist, Roland Barthes, also questioned the ways in which history was presented as an overarching, teleological truth, drawing attention to the similarities between history and fiction. Simon Gunn writes:

History, he argued, borrowed techniques from fiction in order to claim to represent ‘what really happened’ in the past. Like certain novelists, for instance, the historian tended to absent himself from the narrative, so that ‘history seems to tell itself’. This

³⁰ Jean-Francois Lyotard, The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984) xxiv.

³¹ JohnStorey, An Introduction to Cultural Theory and Popular Culture 2nd Edition 1997 (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf,1993) 174.

technique, termed by Barthes as the ‘referential illusion’, made it appear that historical works could provide direct, unmediated access to the events described...³²

In The Rustle of Language, Barthes argued: ‘we can say that historical discourse is a fake performative discourse in which the apparent constative (descriptive) is in fact only the signifier of the speech-act as an act of authority.’³³ He suggests that historians are creating the ‘reality’ of the past through discourse. His ideas looked forward to many of the theoretical debates which were to problematize the idea of historical ‘truth’ and the relationship between history and fiction.

In the 1970s the work of historian Hayden White challenged the arguments of those who viewed history as a discipline with scientific leanings. White highlighted the similarities of the forms of history and literature, arguing:

The historian arranges the events in the chronicle into a hierarchy of significance by assigning events different functions as story elements in such a way as to disclose the formal coherence of a whole set of events considered as a comprehensible process with a discernible beginning, middle, and end.³⁴

White argued that the narrative form was common to both historical and non-historical discourse. In other words, the historian arranged the events in order to create a sense of unity.

³² Simon Gunn, History and Cultural Theory (Harlow: Pearson Education Ltd, 2006) 27.

³³ Barthes, Roland, The Rustle of Language, trans. Richard Howard. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986) 139.

³⁴ Hayden White, Metahistory: the historical imagination in nineteenth century Europe Paberbacks 1975 (London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1973) 7.

Lawrence Stone voices the fears of many of historians who have been less than enthusiastic about White's ideas. He suggests that the acceptance of the theory that the past is a text, 'wide open to personal interpretation, irrespective of the intentions of the author'³⁵, would contribute to history becoming 'an endangered species.'³⁶

However, in Tropics of Discourse, White asserts that a good historian will regularly call his readers' attention to the 'purely provisional nature of his characterizations of events, agents, and agencies found in the always incomplete historical record.'³⁷ He takes the argument further when he controversially refers to historical narratives as 'verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much *invented* as *found* and the forms of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciences.'³⁸

Linda Hutcheon continues the discussion of historiographic representation in her important work on The Poetics of Postmodernism, arguing:

What is foregrounded in postmodern theory and practice is the self-conscious inscription within history of the existing, but usually concealed, attitude of historians toward their material. Provisionality and undecidability, partisanship and even overt politics – these are what replace the pose of objectivity and disinterestedness that denies the interpretive and implicitly evaluative nature of historical representation.³⁹

³⁵ Lawrence Stone, "History & Postmodernism" Past & Present 131 (1991) 217.

³⁶ Lawrence Stone, "History & Postmodernism" Past & Present 131 (1991) 218.

³⁷ Hayden White, Tropics of Discourse: essays in cultural criticism (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1978) 82.

³⁸ Hayden White, Tropics of Discourse: essays in cultural criticism (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1978) 82.

³⁹ Linda Hutcheon, The Politics of Postmodernism (London: Routledge, 2002) 71.

She uses the term ‘historiographic metafiction’ to describe work which contests accepted distinctions between ‘fact’ and ‘fiction’. She asserts that historiographic metafiction questions the view that only history can lay claim to the ‘truth’ by stating that ‘both history and fiction are discourses, human constructs, signifying systems, and both derive their major claim to truth from that identity.’⁴⁰

Hutcheon points to authors such as Salman Rushdie and John Fowles whose novels, with their ‘internalized challenges to historiography’⁴¹ mirror the scepticism about the writing of history in the work of White and La Capra. Historiographic metafiction questions the notion of historical ‘truth’ and draws attention to the process of historiography:

The interaction of the historiographic and the metafictional foregrounds the rejection of the claims of both “authentic” representation and “inauthentic” copy alike, and the very meaning of artistic originality is as forcefully challenged as is the transparency of historical referentiality.⁴²

The work of Waters, Bartlett and Hollinghurst has much in common with Hutcheon’s theories. They are all re-writing the past through fiction, consciously preventing it from appearing definitive or teleological and often with a scepticism towards traditional all-encompassing historical narratives.

⁴⁰ Hutcheon, Linda, A Poetics of Postmodernism: history, theory, fiction. (London: Routledge, 1988) 93.

⁴¹ Linda Hutcheon, A Poetics of Postmodernism: history, theory, fiction (London: Routledge, 1988) 106.

⁴² Hutcheon, Linda, A Poetics of Postmodernism: history, theory, fiction. (London: Routledge, 1988) 110.

When attempting to question historical ‘truths’ and put missing voices back into history, writers have to find some way of combating the traditional master narratives. Social history is one route; fiction is another, more effective, direction which allows space for the imagination.

Jeanette Winterson makes this point:

We are continually understanding our past in a different way because we are continually reinterpreting it and fiction does that very well. But you can only do it well if you let some freedom in for the imagination.⁴³

By re-presenting the past through fiction, the supposed ‘authority’ of the historical account is de-centred. For Waters, Bartlett and Hollinghurst, the novel becomes the space for historical narrative and the multiple voices of its characters, whatever their sexuality or class, tell the story. A polyphony of voices is clamouring to be heard, from rent boys and drag queens to prisoners, pickpockets and music hall artists.

Jeffrey Weeks argues that narratives have the power to effect change: “Through polyvocal story-telling we are remaking ourselves and reinventing the meanings of intimacy.”⁴⁴ A multiplicity of voices is powerful because it calls into question the idea of an accepted ‘official’ historical voice. The voices problematize the belief in a singular ‘objective’ knowledge of the past.

⁴³ Margaret Reynolds & Jonathan Noakes, Jeanette Winterson, The Essential Guide (London: Vintage, 2003) 22.

⁴⁴ Jeffrey Weeks, The World We Have Won (London: Routledge, 2007) 11.

The past is not a place that we know, writes Jeanette Winterson, ‘So to get at the past, fiction is as likely a way of interpreting it as any.’⁴⁵ She argues that fiction is effective because:

...nobody is going to pretend that this is objectivity. Nobody is going to say, ‘This is how life is.’ The writer will say, ‘Here’s a possibility, here’s a set of clues, here’s a pattern which may or may not be useful to you.’ And in those hesitations and gestures, I think, we come closer to a truth than in any possible kind of documentary objectivity.⁴⁶

Waters, Bartlett and Hollinghurst are all concerned with writing a queer history, filling in the gaps with imagination, as opposed to a linear historical narrative. They do this in different ways, subverting traditional genres and forms, presenting the fictional sources of history through unofficial documents or storytelling.

Mark Turner makes the important point that ‘The difficulty in writing queer history (as with any history, in fact) is in getting the story down without levelling it out.’⁴⁷ This levelling out can happen if the story is in a traditional, linear form, told by an ‘official voice’, foregrounding experiences of those considered worthy of being remembered. Levelling can occur if the stories of others who do not fit the predetermined narrative are ignored because of sexuality, gender or class.

Neil Bartlett points to the problems of the focus on the stories of gay heroes which can negate the experiences of any other gay men. In Who Was That Man? he uses Oscar Wilde as an example, arguing that to get an image of Oscar, he must include the story of Charles Parker

⁴⁵ Margaret Reynolds and Jonathan Noakes, Jeanette Winterson (London: Vintage, 2003) 22.

⁴⁶ Margaret Reynolds & Jonathan Noakes, Jeanette Winterson (London: Vintage, 2003) 21.

⁴⁷ Mark Turner Backward Glances (London: Reaction, 2003) 43.

and Alfred Taylor, who sat beside him at the table in the Solferino Restaurant in Rupert Street in the spring of 1893. These two men are not remembered, even though they all enjoyed a champagne dinner after which Oscar took Parker to the Savoy and paid him £2 for sex. Bartlett questions why the stories of rent boys are consigned to the margins of Oscar's story.⁴⁸ A focus that is simply on gay heroes negates the experience of any other gay men.

Mark Turner argues for the importance of 'queer' narratives which go beyond binary ideas of 'gay' and 'straight', stating that gay narratives, such as the coming-out confessional or the urban migration story, have very specific shapes. However, 'queer' approaches to writing, Turner argues, 'seek less to define a specific and agreed upon historical narrative than to offer possible, contingent ways of reading the past in order to engage with the present in ways that do not rely on normative ideas and behaviours. Indeed, to 'queer' history is to challenge, undermine, refute and reconfigure the very notion of norms in 'history'.'⁴⁹

To a greater or lesser degree, Waters, Bartlett and Hollinghurst are all 'queer' writers, in Turner's sense. They offer a range of different ways of reading the past, in order to undermine and refute the 'norms' in history and illuminate the present. The novels reject traditional linear form and are structured in ways that force their readers to engage with the text in an active way, pausing, questioning and juxtaposing different textual fragments. Like the active pupil, the reader, too, is 'doing' rather than just reading history or, according to Roland Barthes, playing with the text. Barthes comments:

⁴⁸ Neil Bartlett, Who Was That Man? (London: Serpent's Tail, 1988) 242.

⁴⁹ Mark Turner Backward Glances (London: Reaction, 2003) 45-6

We know that today post-serial music has radically altered the role of the ‘interpreter’, who is called on to be in some sort the co-author of the score, completing it rather than giving it ‘expression’. The Text is very much a score of this new kind: it asks of the reader a practical collaboration.⁵⁰

This form of collaboration is necessary when reading Bartlett’s novels. Who Was That Man? dispenses with any form of linear narrative, instead offering fragments from a huge range of genres and sources, allowing the reader to weave back and forth through the text in their own way. Mr Clive and Mr Page and Skin Lane both contain the *leitmotif* of a recurrent dream, constantly re-visited and shifting time between the 1920s, 1960s and 1950s. The reader of Mr Clive and Mr Page is presented with a collage of articles, reports, letters and diary extracts, and, armed with a few clues, must find her/his own route through the novel.

Like Bartlett’s work, Hollinghurst’s novels deal with the experiences of gay men in the past and the present, offering the reader a sense of parallel histories. The two narrative voices in the Swimming Pool Library offer the reader a puzzle to solve, a mosaic to try to complete. The Line of Beauty parallels the lives of a young postgraduate and Henry James, the man he refers to as ‘The Master’. Sarah Waters uses two very different narrative voices in both Affinity and Fingersmith, with parallel stories often disrupting the readers’ sense of time, as they are asked to follow a labyrinth of clues.

The connection between form and content is of vital importance in a ‘queer text’, Mark Turner attests. He points out that queer experiences have always been remembered, if at all,

⁵⁰ Roland Barthes, Image, Music, Text, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977) 163.

in the form of ‘fragments and traces.’⁵¹ Because so much queer history has been negated, a form of collage is often used to piece these fragments together with imagination, he states. These scraps and traces are used by Bartlett to construct his work. The text is made up of photos, diaries, letters, newspaper articles, popular songs and film references. This collage of intertextuality represents the fragments that go to make up his history.

Bartlett describes himself as a ‘magpie’⁵² and his work as ‘often collaged out of recycled fragments of ‘found’ text and music.’⁵³ He uses images of gay men all across London, each with their own collection of photographs, songs and diaries, explaining: ‘If you or he can read this collection of words and images, with its attendant justifications, juxtapositions and cross-references, you will have a gay story, a history.’⁵⁴ Mark Turner references Walter Benjamin’s Arcades Project as a similar unconventional reading of history. He observes:

Benjamin’s technique is one of accumulation, of collection or, as the translators of the English edition describe it, an attempt to think about the fragments, rather than the unifying, overarching narratives of urban modernity.⁵⁵

Turner comments that Bartlett ‘...makes the forgotten stories of the past crucial to the way we understand the present, by forcing a collision between the lost traces of history and the shape of contemporary experience.’⁵⁶ These traces are employed to structure the novels from the start. According to Bartlett, Mr Clive and Mr Page began with two images: a beautiful

⁵¹ Mark Turner Backward Glances (London: Reaction, 2003) 43.

⁵² Neil Bartlett, in discussion with Prof John Stokes, Queer @ Kings Seminar, London: King’s College Strand Campus, 9 Mar.2004.

⁵³ Neil Bartlett Solo Voices: Monologues 1987-2004 (London: Oberon Books, 2005) 5.

⁵⁴ Neil Bartlett Who Was That Man? (London: Serpent’s Tail, 1988) 24.

⁵⁵ Mark Turner Backward Glances (London: Reaction, 2003) 36.

⁵⁶ Mark Turner Backward Glances (London: Reaction, 2003) 47.

boy at a window in the sunshine, and a newspaper report of the death of Rock Hudson. From these fragments, Mr Page's story was created.⁵⁷ Gay history as bricolage is also found in Hollinghurst's The Swimming Pool Library. Photos, journals, home movies and porn films, litter and structure the novel. As Benjamin suggests, the 'trace' brings the past nearer to us and so makes more immediate the connections between the past and the present, perhaps especially those connections we have hitherto neglected.' (49)

In order to present history's missing voices, the novels of Waters, Bartlett and Hollinghurst subvert traditional genres. Waters presents crime, romance and adventure stories. The subversion comes through putting a lesbian character in the role of protagonist. Tipping the Velvet is far more than simply the tale of a young woman who is able to 'come out' as a lesbian when she reaches the London music hall stage; it is a text which subverts and destabilizes traditional notions of gender stereotyping when she is located on the London streets dressed as a boy. This is, as Waters describes it, a lesbian historical novel which is a 'performative' rather than a 'descriptive' text, a text that creates what it describes.⁵⁸ Her voices are those that have been hidden from history, in Sheila Rowbotham's phrase, because they are women on the music hall stage, considered 'low' culture, or politically active women, helping the female factory workers of Bethnal Green organize and fight for their rights. The stories are told from the point of view of marginal figures: prisoners, women in the madhouse or in the nineteenth-century pornography industry.

⁵⁷ Neil Bartlett, in discussion with Prof John Stokes, Queer @ Kings Seminar, London: King's College Strand Campus, 9 Mar.2004.

⁵⁸ Laura Doan and Sarah Waters, "Making up lost time: contemporary lesbian writing and the invention of history" Territories of Desire in Queer Culture ed. David Alderson and Linda Anderson. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000) 13.

Bartlett subverts the historical biography, the romance, the fairytale and the thriller genres, with protagonists who are working-class gay men like the Narrator in Who Was That Man?, Boy and O in Ready to Catch Him, or Mr Page, the Selfridges' bank clerk who lives in rented rooms in Camden. In Hollinghurst's The Swimming Pool Library the most engaging story is told by Charles Nantwich who, although a lord, aligns himself always with 'the underdog, the underchap'⁵⁹. Most importantly, of course, all of Hollinghurst's protagonists are outsiders because of their sexuality, lords or not.

Waters, however, is faced with a double invisibility. Not only are lesbian accounts of history almost entirely invisible, so are accounts of the everyday lives of women, particularly those from the working classes. Sheila Rowbotham refers to this problem in her study of women from the puritan revolution to the 1930s, writing that traditional scholarship has denied them a voice in history. Rowbotham writes that she is '...piecing together what I can find from diverse sources, most of them secondary.'⁶⁰ This implies that the stories are not told by the women themselves.

Sarah Waters' Affinity describes the work of historians at the end of the nineteenth century as classifying 'the great lives, the great works, each one of them neat and gleaming and complete'⁶¹, echoing Rankean historiographical methods. The historian would not have been concerned with the small details of women's lives. He would not have described 'petticoats

⁵⁹ Alan Hollinghurst, The Swimming-Pool Library (London: Vintage, 1998) 159.

⁶⁰ Sheila Rowbotham, Hidden from History, 300 Years of Women's Oppression and the Fight Against It (London: Pluto, 1973) x.

⁶¹ Sarah Waters, Affinity, (London: Virago, 1999) 7.

and loose hair’⁶², irrelevancies that would have been secondary to his grand narrative, so they become central to Waters’ narrative.

Both lesbians and gay men are involved in the search for a historical past but, Waters points out, ‘history itself has appeared to offer them an unequal balance of resources for the fulfilment of such a project.’⁶³ She argues that gay men have both subverted and overlapped with ‘historical master narratives’, focussing on a long list of gay heroes from Plato to Wilde. For lesbians, positive historical images have been lacking:

The suppression or absence of lesbian activity from the historical record, on the other hand, has limited the constituency across which a lesbian genealogy might be traced, and made it difficult for women to imagine themselves as participants in an unbroken tradition of same-sex love.⁶⁴

Waters is concerned with *how* lesbian writers go about reclaiming their past. She is critical of projects which merely attempt to ‘recuperate’ the lives of famous lesbians from the past. Instead, she suggests that the novel should be approached as ‘a starting-point to invent a “history” haunted by the present.’⁶⁵ Waters and Doan argue for ‘...a sophisticated treatment of lesbian historiographical issues and contradictions, one that problematises the very

⁶² Sarah Waters, *Affinity*, (London: Virago, 1999) 7.

⁶³ Laura Doan and Sarah Waters, “Making up lost time: contemporary lesbian writing and the invention of history” *Territories of Desire in Queer Culture* ed. David Alderson and Linda Anderson (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000)12.

⁶⁴ Laura Doan and Sarah Waters, “Making up lost time: contemporary lesbian writing and the invention of history” *Territories of Desire in Queer Culture* ed. David Alderson and Linda Anderson (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000) 12-13.

⁶⁵ Laura Doan and Sarah Waters, “Making up lost time: contemporary lesbian writing and the invention of history” *Territories of Desire in Queer Culture* ed. David Alderson and Linda Anderson. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000) 13.

categories with which sex and gender are constructed.’⁶⁶ Waters’ novels achieve this through foregrounding the performativity of gender, and blurring the boundaries of class.

The invisibility of lesbian sexuality in the nineteenth century makes searching even for fragments of history difficult. Scientists were still trying to establish if lesbians existed at all.

Jeffrey Weeks observes:

By the end of the nineteenth century, male homosexuality was beginning to find a voice, but it was to be another generation before female homosexuality reached a corresponding level of articulateness. While intimations of lesbianism persist in European history, our knowledge of a lesbian life-style and identity remains shadowy, almost non-existent.⁶⁷

Because of the ‘double invisibility’ of lesbians and women in the past, it is harder to find traces of lesbian history. Since lesbianism was not legislated against in Britain, there is a lack of legal documents or newspaper reports to mine. Waters’ work is structured differently from Bartlett’s and Hollinghurst’s because of this. Bartlett and Hollinghurst make use of official reports and documents, but with precious few fragments of a lesbian past available, it is as if even more imagination is needed on Waters’ part.

In discussing her research for the novel Affinity, Sarah Waters’ comments on the lack of documentation on lesbian history, nevertheless, she was able to re-appropriate some images originally intended for men’s consumption:

⁶⁶ Laura Doan and Sarah Waters, “Making up lost time: contemporary lesbian writing and the invention of history” Territories of Desire in Queer Culture ed. David Alderson and Linda Anderson. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000) 25.

⁶⁷ Jeffrey Weeks, Coming Out (London: Quartet, 1990) 87.

When I've been looking for lesbian history there's not actually that much from the nineteenth century, but when you look at pornography from the nineteenth century there's lots of quite jolly images of women having sex with each other and I ended up thinking what can I do with this...⁶⁸

What she did was to use a form of collage, as employed by Bartlett, taking the pictures, and use them as a way of showing lesbians writing erotic stories to their own agenda, creating a space for lesbian sexuality in a male-dominated Victorian society.

For their readings of the past, Bartlett, Waters and Hollinghurst turn to the city to tell their stories. Asked why cities appear so often in *her* work, Jeanette Winterson states:

'Because cities are living things... They are repositories of the past and they are places where energy is kept locked, and can be tapped, and I think if you are at all sensitive to that, you will pick it up.'⁶⁹

Waters, Bartlett and Hollinghurst situate their texts in the city because it is this liminal space, with its polyphony of voices, which disrupts traditional narratives of the past. Their London is a physical but also a metaphorical place; a city of the mind. In Waters' work, it is inextricably linked with the late nineteenth century's transition into modernity. For Bartlett it contains rich history, with fragments of stories, songs and pictures waiting to be explored. Hollinghurst's city offers a mosaic of the classical and the squalid, tantalisingly incomplete.

⁶⁸ Sarah Waters, Interview Radio 4 Bookclub (3 May 2007).
http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/arts/bookclub/ram/bookclub_20040307.ram

⁶⁹ Margaret Reynolds and Jonathan Noakes, Jeanette Winterson (London: Vintage, 2003) 19.

For all three writers the city contains parallel times and stories. As Peter Ackroyd observes, the secret of its power is that ‘...the ancient city and the modern city literally lie beside each other; one cannot be imagined without the other.’⁷⁰ Lesbian and gay history is, of necessity, assembled from fragments, like the city. It is polyvocal and has hidden spaces and coded language, as does the city.

The work of Walter Benjamin is important to an interpretation of the work of all three novelists. Mark Turner points out that it is Benjamin’s Arcades Project that contains a ‘vision of the queer city of modernity.’⁷¹ This unfinished project is a huge montage of ideas and extracts on the theme of the metropolis, concerned with fragments, rather than an all-encompassing, linear view of the city and its history. Turner points out that it ‘allows for more arbitrary, random connections to be made in the city.’⁷²

Graeme Gilloch makes the point that the Arcades Project itself takes the form of a city:

The text is city-like. In its pages one may linger in the structures and spaces of the urban complex, the arcades and world exhibition centres, the museums and railway-stations, the boulevards and the Metro.⁷³

Here, Gilloch is also describing the way a queer history can be mapped in the city. Neil Bartlett’s Who Was That Man? is city-like in structure, too. His characters walk the London streets from one century to another, pausing to observe the minutiae of the city. Bartlett’s

⁷⁰ Peter Ackroyd, London, The Biography (London: Chatto and Windus, 2000) 778.

⁷¹ Mark Turner, Backward Glances (London: Reaktion, 2003) 46.

⁷² Mark Turner, Backward Glances (London: Reaktion, 2003) 36.

⁷³ Graeme Gilloch, Myth and Metropolis, Walter Benjamin and the City (Cambridge, Polity Press, 1996) 102.

Narrator in Who Was That Man? discovers his 'past' through wandering through the streets. He finds that, as Ackroyd observes, 'The levels of the centuries are all compact, revealing the historical density of London.'⁷⁴ Bartlett's young storyteller asks:

What if I rounded the corner of Villiers Street at Midnight, and suddenly found myself walking by gaslight, and the man looking over his shoulder at me as he passed had the same moustache, but different clothes, the well-cut black and white evening dress of the summer of 1891 – would we recognize each other? Would I smile at him too, knowing that we were going to the same place, looking for the same thing?⁷⁵

The concept of time operating in a non-linear way in the city appeals to writers of queer history. Jeanette Winterson suggests it 'stacks vertically,' and 'there is no past, present, future, only simultaneous layers of reality'.⁷⁶

Despite his sometimes sentimental approach to the city as a whole, Ackroyd's concern with the minutiae of everyday detail and life at street level has echoes of Benjamin's Arcades Project. The reader can access Ackroyd's story of London by dipping into it at any point, as he asserts:

The biography of London also defies chronology. Contemporary theorists have suggested that linear time is in itself a figment of the human imagination, but London has already anticipated their conclusions. There are many different forms of time in the city, and it would be foolish of me to change its character for the sake of creating a conventional narrative.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Peter Ackroyd, London, The Biography (London: Chatto and Windus, 2000) 778.

⁷⁵ Neil Bartlett Who Was That Man? (London: Serpent's Tail, 1988) xx-xxi.

⁷⁶ Jeanette Winterson, The PowerBook (London: Jonathan Cape, 2000) 185.

⁷⁷ Peter Ackroyd, London, The Biography (London: Chatto and Windus, 2000) 2.

Ackroyd's *style* of history is one of the reasons why he is important to this project. He writes the *biography* of London, imagining the city as a body with a personality. This image can be traced back to pictures of the City of God, with Christ as its head. However, Ackroyd suggests that the heart of London is best envisaged in the following homoerotic image:

...the form of a young man with his arms outstretched in a gesture of liberation; the figure is taken from a Roman bronze but it embodies the energy and exultation of a city continually expanding in great waves of progress and of confidence. Here might be found the 'heart of London beating warm.'⁷⁸

This calls to mind the image of the allegorical figure of strength, depicted at the start of Bartlett's Ready To Catch Him Should He Fall, a beautiful naked boy who offers a miniature city in the palm of his hand.

Ackroyd is aware that his style will not be palatable to all and points out that some will object, arguing that such a biography can form no part of a 'true' history. He is questioning the whole idea of any one history that is 'true'.

For Bartlett, Waters and Hollinghurst, the city is not simply employed as a site of romantic wish-fulfilment. Many of the novels use the 'coming to London and coming out' narrative, as told by many men in oral history projects, such as Hall-Carpenter, as their starting point, but

⁷⁸ Peter Ackroyd, London, The Biography (London: Chatto and Windus, 2000) 1.

their cities are never purely positive spaces that offer a welcoming new life. They all show the harsh side of the metropolis too.

Matt Cook comments: ‘...think of ‘gay’ men and ‘gay’ culture and we think of cities...’⁷⁹

However, he warns that there is a danger of over-simplifying the city as a purely liberating space. There are a range of *diverse* stories of homosexuality in the metropolis. Men’s experiences vary widely, according to class, race, age and place. While the city to some extent offers gay men an already structured sub-culture, a community, their experience is not always positive.

Matt Houlbrook argues against ‘simplistic invocations of urbanism as a liberating agent or the city as a queer space...’⁸⁰ which ‘efface very real experiences of the city as alienating, disruptive and dangerous.’⁸¹ Waters, Bartlett and Hollinghurst present their cities with a range of faces, as Nan King comments in Tipping The Velvet, London can be ‘so squalid and so splendid, so ugly and so grand’⁸²

Just as, according to Turner, a queer history denies a single over-arching view of the past, so cultural geographer Michel de Certeau’s essay Walking in the City presents the possibility of a metropolis operating against the rules and maps of urban planners. He describes an official urban mapping from above, a panoptic view of the city of New York from the top of the

⁷⁹ Cook, Matt, London and the Culture of Homosexuality, 1885-1914 (Cambridge UP, 2003) 2.

⁸⁰ Matt Houlbrook, Queer London, Perils and Pleasures in the Sexual Metropolis, 1918-1957 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005) 5.

⁸¹ Matt Houlbrook, Queer London, Perils and Pleasures in the Sexual Metropolis, 1918-1957 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005) 5.

⁸² Sarah Waters, Tipping the Velvet (London: Virago, 1998) 66.

World Trade Centre. This view suggests the city is 'readable', in fact it is a 'facsimile'⁸³ and does not represent or understand the practices of the city.

De Certeau is important to this project, since he articulates how alternative routes around the city operate, quite apart from its official plan. He describes how the 'ordinary practitioners' of the city, the walkers, live 'down below'⁸⁴ and move in spaces that cannot be seen from above, spaces off the official city maps. The paths of these ordinary practitioners cannot be read from above. This is where Bartlett, Hollinghurst and Waters' protagonists negotiate the city. They 'follow the thicks and thins of an urban "text" '⁸⁵, a 'manifold story that has neither author nor spectator, shaped out of fragments of trajectories and alterations of spaces: in relation to representations it remains daily and indefinitely other.'⁸⁶

Frank Mort comments that de Certeau offers an alternative to the type of spatialising contained within official discourses, or 'strategic mapping':⁸⁷

It is essentially concerned with the geography of surveillance. Operating from on high, these techniques mobilise a panoptic vision of the city and its subjects. Spatial surveys of this type invariable offer the viewer mastery of its spaces through sight. And the

⁸³ Michel de Certeau, "Walking in the City," The Cultural Studies Reader ed. Simon During, (London: Routledge, 1993) 153.

⁸⁴ Michel de Certeau, "Walking in the City," The Cultural Studies Reader ed. Simon During, (London: Routledge, 1993) 153.

⁸⁵ Michel de Certeau, "Walking in the City," The Cultural Studies Reader ed. Simon During, (London: Routledge, 1993) 153.

⁸⁶ Michel de Certeau, "Walking in the City," The Cultural Studies Reader ed. Simon During, (London: Routledge, 1993) 153.

⁸⁷ Frank Mort, "Mapping Sexual London," New Formations 37 – Sexual Geographies (Lawrence and Wishart, 1999) 105.

point of visions is generally exterior to the practices which it seeks to observe, measure and classify.⁸⁸

It is at street level that alternative routes can be mapped, through defiant ‘pedestrian rhetorics’, challenging the official maps.⁸⁹

Mort uses Soho as an example of the differing ways in which the metropolis can be mapped, from above or from below. A map made by the Metropolitan Police in 1953 and presented as evidence to the Wolfenden Committee, showed key areas of indecency and importuning in London’s West End. This shows what Mort describes as ‘knowledge from the outside’⁹⁰ with no sense of any excitement or fun the map could embody. ‘There was no celebration of the pleasures of sexual strangeness and no pedestrianised mingling with the homosexual crowd, which characterised the more exotic tourist guides to London.’⁹¹ The map is distanced from the life of the streets.

Alternatively, gay men at this time would have been making their own sub-cultural maps of the city through coded word of mouth. Many of the sites on the police map were vibrant

⁸⁸ Frank Mort, “Mapping Sexual London” New Formations 37 – Sexual Geographies (Lawrence and Wishart, 1999) 105.

⁸⁹ Frank Mort, “Mapping Sexual London” New Formations 37 – Sexual Geographies (Lawrence and Wishart, 1999) 105.

⁹⁰ Frank Mort, “Mapping Sexual London” New Formations 37 – Sexual Geographies (Lawrence and Wishart, 1999) 100.

⁹¹ Frank Mort, “Mapping Sexual London” New Formations 37 – Sexual Geographies (Lawrence and Wishart, 1999) 100.

queer spaces, offering a meeting-place for a wide range of cultures. In fact, as Mort observes, 1950s Soho was 'London's own version of bohemia.'⁹²

De Certeau's theories are also useful when considering the experience of women in the city. For Waters' characters, the desire to negotiate the city streets is a key factor in their fight against oppression. De Certeau suggests that surveys of routes from above miss what was 'the act itself of passing by.'⁹³ Waters depicts everyday practices of women at the end of the 19th Century that are other than those that are traditionally visible. Her women do find ways to negotiate the city streets and Sue Trinder positively swaggers around the byways of The Borough.

Elizabeth Wilson's description of 'interstitial or indeterminate spaces' was an idea that was crucial at the start of this project; with its aims to consider how the marginalized create their own paths through the city. Wilson articulates a key theme in Sarah Waters' work when she argues that city life has, historically, offered more opportunities for women than rural life, even if they were not always realized:

⁹² Frank Mort, "Mapping Sexual London" New Formations 37 – Sexual Geographies (Lawrence and Wishart, 1999) 105.

⁹³ Michel de Certeau, "Walking in the City" The Cultural Studies Reader ed. Simon During (London: Routledge, 1993) 153

These opportunities were often tantalisingly unfulfilled, offset by counter-influences of exploitation, exclusion and a harsh sexual morality; nevertheless, urbanisation provided one plank in the gradual emancipation of women.’⁹⁴

This argument is illustrated particularly in Tipping The Velvet and Fingersmith, which both emphasise, for their protagonists, the sheer possibilities and potential of London, created by its scale and growth in the nineteenth century. It is particularly the chance encounter on a London street that makes it such a vital place for Sue Trinder and Nan King.

The work of Judith Butler has been important to the study of all three writers’ work. In Gender Trouble, Butler argues that gender is performative and shows that; ‘...what we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylisation of the body.’⁹⁵ This idea is important in challenging traditional masculine/feminine binary opposites, which is what Waters and Bartlett are doing in their work. Butler describes a society where gender is taken for granted, yet strongly policed at the same time. Sarah Waters focuses on just such society particularly in Affinity, while in Skin Lane Neil Bartlett presents a 1960s fur trade in which everything is organized along gender lines, from the workrooms to the animal skins themselves.

In Bodies That Matter, Butler considers the drag queen, who also highlights the performativity of gender, showing that ‘femininity’ is something that can be put on like

⁹⁴ Elizabeth Wilson The Contradictions of Culture (London: Sage, 2001) 67.

⁹⁵ Judith Butler, Gender Trouble (New York: Routledge, 1999) xv.

clothes, on male or female bodies. Her arguments are important for Sarah Waters' themes of cross-dressing in Tipping The Velvet and Neil Bartlett's depictions of drag and camp being used as weapons to challenge traditional gender expectations.⁹⁶

Neil Bartlett and Alan Hollinghurst were born in the 1950s, and Sarah Waters in the 1960s. They would all have been educated during a period in which significant gains were being made through political activism by feminist groups and organizations such as Gay Liberation Front and Stonewall. The sense that society and ideology could be shaped for better or worse by historical forces would have impressed itself upon them. All three writers are re-imagining the past from a 20th–21st Century perspective so an awareness of the patterns and parallels of history is therefore fundamental to their perceptions.

There are a number of key historical moments on which the novels in this project focus. These are what Jeffrey Weeks has referred to as 'fateful moments' – times when conventional narratives, personal and social, are disrupted and questioned.⁹⁷ For Sarah Waters, these moments involve the changing role of women in the late 19th century and the move towards Modernism. For Bartlett and Hollinghurst, the moments often reveal parallel experiences in different generations of gay Londoners, from men in the late 19th to the late 20th Centuries.

⁹⁶ I have explored some of the debates around the history of lesbian/feminism in the introduction to the chapters on Sarah Waters.

⁹⁷ Jeffrey Weeks, "Fateful Moments, Wolfenden, Identity, Citizenship" Wolfenden 50 Conference (London: Strand Campus, King's College 28 Jun.2007).

Tipping The Velvet, Affinity and Fingersmith are all set in a city that is growing in power and, since the coming of the railways in the mid nineteenth century, in accessibility. Peter Ackroyd describes the effect the railways had on London:

The entire railway network, which is still in use almost 150 years later, was imposed upon the capital within a space of some twenty-five years between 1852 and 1877....One consequence was that the city became truly the centre of the nation, with all the lines of energy leading directly to it.⁹⁸

The image is of London as the hub of the wheel, the heart of the country. The city that Tipping The Velvet's Nan King arrives in is not only new for her, but was going through changes that affected all of its inhabitants. Peter Ackroyd writes that after the railways arrived: 'It was indeed a new city; or, at least, the quality of experience within it had suffered a change.'⁹⁹

Sarah Waters is concerned with the limits on women's lives in the nineteenth century and the ways in which they have struggled to break out of old patterns of living and find new ones. The constraints involve gender, sexuality and class. Lynda Nead observes that: 'Nineteenth century England is characterized by the growth of an urban industrial economy and the emergence of a powerful and dominant middle class.'¹⁰⁰ Sarah Waters paints a picture of this middle class as one which in many ways imposes more restrictions

⁹⁸ Peter Ackroyd, London, The Biography (London: Chatto and Windus, 2000) 591.

⁹⁹ Peter Ackroyd, London, The Biography (London: Chatto and Windus, 2000) 591.

¹⁰⁰ Lynda Nead, Myths of Sexuality (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990) 5.

on women than the working class, imprisoning them in rigid gender roles. Lynda Nead writes:

In the nineteenth century gender was a primary category in the regulation of sexuality; the male sexual urge was understood to be active, aggressive and spontaneous whilst female sexuality was defined in relation to the male and was believed to be weak, passive and responsive.¹⁰¹

Waters protagonists challenge these gender assumptions and highlight Judith Butler's assertion that gender is not innate.¹⁰² Waters focuses on small details such as women's clothing to illustrate how gender is a construct. Fingersmith's Sue Trinder cannot believe the amount of layers a lady has to wear, and sees the fact that she is laced into her gown at the back as a sign of imprisonment. In Tipping The Velvet, when Nan King puts on men's clothes she starts to swagger, whether on the music hall stage or the streets of London. Sheila Rowbotham observes:

The Victorian middle-classes found their sentiment in the women-folk encased in their crinolines. The Victorian wife was quite literally insulated from the sources of her man's prosperity. As the century progressed not only women's clothes but also the household became larger and more upholstered. It was the visible sign of the wealth and security of the middle-class man.¹⁰³

Women from the middle classes started to campaign in the nineteenth century to limit the legal powers men had over their wives. An example in Fingersmith of husbands abandoning wives in asylums provides a vivid illustration of this problem. Some battles were won, with

¹⁰¹ Lynda Nead, Myths of Sexuality (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990) 6.

¹⁰² Judith Butler, Gender Trouble (New York: Routledge, 1999) xv.

¹⁰³ Sheila Rowbotham, Hidden From History (London: Pluto, 1977) 47.

women being allowed independent ownership of their own property in 1882, but progress was slow. Rowbotham comments:

But while some of the legal power of patriarchy was whittled away, the control of men over women in society was evident in education, work and politics. The long struggle of women for entrance into schools and colleges was heartbreakingly slow...

...The vote seemed to be the key. If women could vote they could change man-made laws. The working-class agitation for the franchise raised the hope that women might be included.¹⁰⁴

However, opportunities for working class women were starting to improve at the end of the nineteenth century and this makes it an important place for Waters to choose to situate her characters. In her study of women's history, Sheila Rowbotham points out that at the end of the nineteenth century political activism was starting to impact on women's lives. In 1888, the year that Tipping the Velvet begins, women workers were taking action across the country to fight for better pay and conditions: 'From 1888 to around 1892 there was a considerable amount of spontaneous industrial action not only by men but also by women who had never organised before', observes Rowbotham.¹⁰⁵ Tipping the Velvet ends with a workers' rally in Victoria Park, a demonstration, with stalls and a pageant and calls for the crowd to campaign for votes for women.

Rowbotham points out that there was evidently awareness in the 1890s, among working class women, of the wider implications of militancy. Margaret McMillan, a member of the ILP, writes in her biography of her sister Rachel:

¹⁰⁴ Sheila Rowbotham, Hidden From History (London: Pluto, 1977) 50.

¹⁰⁵ Sheila Rowbotham, Hidden From History (London: Pluto, 1977) 61.

A new feature was the stir and murmur among women. Overworked mothers and wives, young girls too and older women who were unmarried, and living by their own labour, at factory or workshop, wakened as from sleep and began to conceive new hope and purpose.¹⁰⁶

However, little is known about how wide this feeling was, writes Rowbotham, ‘because they have only been considered worthy of history in exceptional instances.’¹⁰⁷

Many of the key historical moments in the work of Bartlett and Hollinghurst are inextricably linked with law making and enforcement. Gay men’s lives have been regularly policed by the law, whether through inequality with heterosexuals in the age of consent, prison sentences for ‘misdemeanours’ or moves by the government to erase the ‘promotion’ of homosexuality from schools in the 1980s.

In England, where the novels are set, the death penalty for buggery was abolished in 1861, replaced by a prison sentence of between ten years or life and only revoked in The 1967 Sexual Offences Act. However, the law was in many ways tightened in 1885 by Section 11 of The Criminal Law Amendment Act, or the Labouchère Agreement. This made all male homosexual acts, short of buggery, illegal whether they were committed in public or in private and created the offence of ‘gross indecency’. Imprisonment for up to two years could follow a conviction. The Labouchère Agreement became known as the ‘blackmailer’s charter’ because of the addition of the words ‘in public or private’ This was followed by The

¹⁰⁶ Margaret McMillan, The Life of Rachel McMillan (London, 1927) 137.

¹⁰⁷ Sheila Rowbotham, Hidden From History (London: Pluto, 1977) 61.

1898 Vagrancy Act which tightened up the law on ‘soliciting or importuning for immoral purposes.’¹⁰⁸ Matt Cook describes Oscar Wilde as ‘The most famous victim of Labouchère’s amendment.’¹⁰⁹

The longevity of these laws meant that they affected the lives of generations of gay men, as the novels’ protagonists illustrate. Charles Nantwich in The Swimming Pool Library is imprisoned for soliciting, while Mr F in Skin Lane suffers blackmail. Even by the 1980s – by which time the laws have changed – they still provide the ideological impetus for renewed discrimination as a reaction to HIV/AIDS.

The 1980s are used by both Bartlett and Hollinghurst as a setting for their novels and are paralleled by both authors, with other, earlier key fateful moments, particularly the 1950s. The 1980s were the time of Margaret Thatcher’s focus on the importance of the ‘traditional family’. In her memoirs, Thatcher defends her government’s actions by arguing that in the mid 1980s: ‘...all the evidence – statistical and anecdotal – pointed to the breakdown of families as the starting point for a range of social ills of which getting into trouble with the police was only one.’¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁸ For more information see Jeffrey Weeks, Coming Out (London: Quartet, 1990) 258.

¹⁰⁹ Matt Cook, A Gay History of Britain (Oxford: Greenwood World, 2007) 138.

¹¹⁰ Margaret Thatcher, The Downing Street Years (London: Harper Collins, 1993) 629.

Linda Nead warns against assuming that the 1980s return to Victorian values was a simple looking back to the past. However, she argues:

Nevertheless, the resemblances between the representations of sexuality in the Victorian period and the organization of sexual behaviour in the present are striking. The categorization of normality and deviancy continues; the definitions may have shifted but the distinctions remain.¹¹¹

The Government's focus on the family in the 1980s was important, since it aimed to reinforce traditional, heterosexual roles. There was no room for any different ways of living as a family which were dismissed by Section 28 when it became law in 1988, as: 'pretended family relationships'. Section 28 was written into The 1988 Local Government Act and stated that:

A local authority shall not:

- a) intentionally promote homosexuality or publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality;
- b) promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship.¹¹²

It is against the backdrop of such rigid legislation that Bartlett and Hollinghurst set their work. Bartlett often subverts the idea of a 'pretended family relationship' by showing genuine support for gay men from their community. Hollinghurst subverts the concept of normality by

¹¹¹ Lynda Nead, Myths of Sexuality (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990) 10.

¹¹² Matt Cook, A Gay History of Britain (Oxford: Greenwood World, 2007) 205.

showing how destructive the ‘real’, heterosexual family can be. Their work challenges the legislation that was a deliberate attempt to silence the gay community. Section 28 was redolent of an earlier time in the 1950s, when newspapers carried articles about evil homosexuals and linked to the fears in the 1950s of predatory men out to infect society.

In 1981 reports from the US Center of Disease Control stated that five young gay men had died from a rare pneumonia in Los Angeles. Two years later, Terry Higgins died at St. Thomas’s Hospital in London. He was 37 and the first known person in Britain to die of an AIDS-related disease. However, the UK government paid little attention to the problem all the time it seemed to affect only the gay community.

In his autobiography, Rupert Everett describes the fear that followed the arrival of AIDS in the UK:

Aids had arrived in London, like a hurricane from across the sea. We had heard the odd story from New York, or San Francisco, but information was always cluttered and chaotic, and anyone who had contracted AIDS in the States had been terrorised into hiding.

‘Don’t sleep with any Americans, whatever you do,’ we said to each other rather half-heartedly, but the wind got stronger as the eye approached.’¹¹³

¹¹³ Rupert Everett, Red Carpets and Other Banana Skins (London: Abacus, 2007) 148.

The government finally began AIDS awareness campaigns in the mid 1980s, but by that time, due to scare stories in the tabloid press and hysteria from the religious right, an enormous anti-gay backlash had begun. This had a devastating effect on both gay men and lesbians, as they feared that gains made by political activism in the 1970s, from feminist groups, Gay Liberation Front, Stonewall and many others, would be negated.

Newspaper stories during the AIDS crisis continued to apportion blame to gay men. A report in the Daily Star in 1991 on the death of Freddie Mercury is headlined: 'The wild life and gay times of the master of excess'.¹¹⁴ According to the Daily Star, Mercury died alone in the bed 'which had been the crossroad of his fatally promiscuous private life.'¹¹⁵ In the same year The Evening Standard cautions against the 'canonization' of AIDS victims such as Mercury and film director Tony Richardson, with the words: 'There's nothing heroic about dying from AIDS'.¹¹⁶ This sort of homophobic reporting was part of a much bigger picture which included repeated physical and verbal attacks on gay men, raids on gay bookshops and the marginalization of a large section of society.

Neil Bartlett describes this time as: 'The plague years in Thatcher's London.'¹¹⁷ He describes the intense and conflicting emotions of the time, reflected in his novel Ready to Catch Him Should He Fall and Alan Hollinghurst's The Line of Beauty, as: 'Exhilarating defiance;

¹¹⁴ Michael Hellicar, "The wild life and gay times of the master of excess" (Daily Star 26 Nov.1991).

¹¹⁵ Michael Hellicar, "The wild life and gay times of the master of excess" (Daily Star 26 Nov.1991).

¹¹⁶ John Casey, "Why there's nothing heroic about dying from AIDS" (The Evening Standard 27 Nov. 1991).

¹¹⁷ Neil Bartlett, Solo Voices: Monologues 1987-2004 (London: Oberon Books, 2005) 9.

numbed pain; almost disabling anger.’¹¹⁸ However, his novels that deal with this time, Ready To Catch Him Should He Fall and Who Was That Man? do not show a community defeated. Instead they reinforce the agency of gay men through the use of camp and collage. The boys in The Bar in Ready To Catch Him Should He Fall dance their way through the crisis and, in spite of regular violence and prejudice, proudly assert their rights. The Narrator asks: ‘What did you expect us to do?’ (26) The novel is defiant and uses camp as a weapon.

Looking for links with the experience of men in the 1980s leads Bartlett as far back as Oscar Wilde’s trial and his contemporaries in the late nineteenth century. Hollinghurst goes back to more recent history; the experience of gay men in the 1950s. The similarities of the 1950s to the 1980s are striking, and the parallels are developed by Hollinghurst in The Swimming Pool Library. The period saw a similar focus on the family and a growing fear of homosexuality as a disease. Matt Cook explains that after the end of the war: ‘A growing emphasis on domesticity and family life and changing work patterns affected the dynamics of the queer subculture.’¹¹⁹

There was a large rise in prosecutions for ‘gross indecency’ in the late 40s and early 50s and gay men felt the need to be more vigilant in order to avoid arrest. The actor John Gielgud was convicted for cottaging in the capital in 1953 and other high-profile prosecutions followed.

John Alcock speaks of a general climate of fear:

¹¹⁸ Neil Bartlett, Solo Voices: Monologues 1987-2004 (London: Oberon Books, 2005) 9.

¹¹⁹ Matt Cook, A Gay History of Britain (Oxford: Greenwood World, 2007) 153.

Gay bars in that particular period were so oppressive. ... Every time the door opened everybody's eyes would go round as if the police were going to come in at any moment. There was always that uncertainty. It was extremely unpleasant.¹²⁰

In 1955 the Wolfenden Committee was set up to investigate prostitution and homosexuality. The committee reported in 1957, stating that its role was to uphold public decency and not to compel particular types of moral behaviour. It proposed the decriminalization of homosexuality in private, but laws on public displays of sexuality were tightened up. Pleased that so many eminent people were backing the reform, John Alcock says that it was time the law was changed because: '...there was an awful lot of sadness. Men were committing suicide and people were being blackmailed and robbed, being beaten up – all kinds of things like that were happening.'¹²¹

Sex between two consenting adults, over 21 and in private, was decriminalised in The 1967 Sexual Offences Act. Matt Cook observes that the public/private distinction was of key importance:

...for the purposes of the law 'public' was anywhere where a third party was likely to be present; and it remained illegal for more than two men to have sex together. Lord Arran underscored the conservative import of the Act when he asked homosexual men 'to show their thanks by comporting themselves quietly and with dignity.'¹²²

¹²⁰ The Hall Carpenter Archives, Gay Men's Oral History Group, Walking After Midnight, Gay Men's Life Stories (London: Routledge, 1989) 51.

¹²¹ The Hall Carpenter Archives, Gay Men's Oral History Group, Walking After Midnight, Gay Men's Life Stories (London: Routledge, 1989) 52.

¹²² Matt Cook, A Gay History of Britain (Oxford: Greenwood World, 2007) 176.

The stories of the mid 1950s and 1960s, in times of change and shifting boundaries, are told by Bartlett and Hollinghurst through the eyes of men who, in Bartlett's case particularly, do not always understand that their personal revolutions are an important part of the larger changes. Jeffrey Weeks points to the power of such narratives of individual lives, observing:

Through stories - of desire and love, of hope and mundane reality, of excitement and disappointment – told to willing listeners in communities of meaning, people imagine and re-imagine who and what they are and what they want to become.¹²³

Waters, Bartlett and Hollinghurst all situate their work in times when conventional narratives, personal and social, are disrupted and challenged. Waters foregrounds the experience of lesbians in a nineteenth century society which places physical and social constraints upon women. Through challenging those constraints her characters are attempting to carve a space for themselves in the city. Tipping the Velvet shares the theme of coming to the city, a recurrent trope in both Bartlett and Hollinghurst's work. For Waters, the city is ambiguous, both splendid and squalid, but ultimately it offers her protagonists the opportunity to be heard. It is in the liminal and illegitimate spaces of the city that her characters find their voices.

Bartlett's four novels are arranged here in two chapters. The first focuses on Who Was That Man? and Mr Clive and Mr Page. The novels consider the assemblage of gay history, presenting it through a collage of news cuttings, letters, articles and diary entries. The second

¹²³ Jeffrey Weeks, The World We Have Won (Oxford: Routledge, 2007) 10.

Bartlett chapter includes Ready to Catch Him Should he Fall and Skin Lane, two novels that are linked by unmarked doors in parts of the city that many people do not even know exist. These doors hide history, secrets and dreams.

In his novels and his work for theatre, Bartlett writes with a strong sense of the importance of a supportive community and the need for knowledge of a gay history. Defiant in the face of prejudice, Bartlett has described his work as ‘an attempt to bear witness to the truth of our gay lives.’¹²⁴

The Swimming Pool Library and The Line of Beauty are both set in the 1980s and continue the theme of coming to London. Hollinghurst is also concerned with the way in which history is hidden in the city, but his London is often a far colder place than Bartlett’s. Like Waters, Hollinghurst presents a city that is ambiguous, the buildings above ground masking another hidden world below.

All three writers present very different Londons, but all three use their city to re-imagine the past. The following chapters aim to explore these similarities and differences.

¹²⁴ Paul Burston, “Neil Bartlett: I got you under my skin” (The Independent 11 Mar.2007).

CHAPTER ONE: SARAH WATERS

Waters Introduction

Tipping the Velvet

Affinity

Fingersmith

Tipping the Velvet

Affinity

Fingersmith

Introduction

Sarah Waters is re-inventing history through fiction. She is reclaiming the past, foregrounding the missing voices of women on the edges of society, either because of class or sexuality or, often, just because they are women in a predominantly patriarchal society. She is not only putting these voices back into history, but into the present, too.

Waters' texts all pose the question: 'What can be known about history?' They stress the need to unlearn and re-make the stories we have been told, questioning the 'truths' we have been taught. As E.H. Carr argues, official history must be questioned. 'Facts', or so-called 'objective' evidence cannot be relied upon.¹²⁵

Rod Mengham and Philip Tew refer to 'A shadow cast by modern knowingness'¹²⁶ in the work of Waters. This knowingness covers a breadth of lesbian-feminist theory and history and the novels all consciously focus on postmodern issues, such as the writing of history and

¹²⁵ E.H Carr, What is History? (London: Penguin, 1990) 12.

¹²⁶ Mengham, Rod, & Philip Tew, ed., British Fiction Today. (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2006) 152.

fiction and the problematizing of identity and power. Much current theory is alluded to, with resonances from Lillian Faderman to Michel Foucault and Judith Butler. Cora Kaplan states that ‘theory and literary criticism underpins these narratives as generic emphasis, in setting, in themes: it does not parse the narrative for us, or cut it up into bite-sized lessons’.¹²⁷

As Kaplan points out, the impact of Michel Foucault’s work, Discipline and Punish, is apparent through the images of the asylum in Fingersmith and Affinity’s Millbank prison, a rigid, panoptican where the women can be watched at all times. Also influential in Waters’ work is Foucault’s History of Sexuality, where he argues that in the nineteenth century ‘what came under scrutiny was the sexuality of children, mad men and women, and criminals; the sensuality of those who did not like the opposite sex; reveries, obsessions, petty manias, or great transports of rage.’¹²⁸ In both Affinity and Fingersmith, women, particularly those who do not fit society’s ‘norms’, are the subjects of constant scrutiny. However, though the aim of the nineteenth-century medicalization of ‘unproductive sexualities’ may have been to control, Foucault argues, it produced a ‘multiplication of discourses concerning sex.’¹²⁹

Kaplan states that Waters’ work is: ‘built on the combined scholarship that historians of sexuality, together with feminist, gay, lesbian and queer studies have uncovered.’¹³⁰

¹²⁷ Cora Kaplan, Victoriana: histories, fictions, criticisms (Edinburgh: Cromwell Press, 2007) 114.

¹²⁸ Michel Foucault, The History of Sexuality: Vol. 1. The Will to Knowledge, Trans. Robert Hurley, (London: Penguin Books Ltd. 1998.) 38-9.

¹²⁹ Michel Foucault, The History of Sexuality: Vol. 1. The Will to Knowledge, Trans. Robert Hurley, (London: Penguin Books Ltd. 1998) 18.

¹³⁰ Cora Kaplan, Victoriana: histories, fictions, criticisms (Edinburgh: Cromwell Press, 2007) 111.

Vital to Waters' work is an awareness of the importance of lesbian feminist history which, according to Rebecca Jennings 'has frequently been associated with silence, invisibility and denial.'¹³¹ In their introduction to Not a Passing Phase, published in 1993, the Lesbian History Group observed that while history had diminished the role of women, it had ignored that of lesbians:

First, there is relatively little explicit information about lesbian lives in the past, though probably much more than we know about at the moment. Second, much important material has been suppressed as irrelevant, or its significance overlooked by scholars pursuing a different theory. Material may have been omitted as 'private' or likely to embarrass the family or alienate the reader. Much of the evidence we do have has been distorted by historians who wilfully or through ignorance have turned lesbian lives into 'normal' heterosexual ones. Women can be ignored, but lesbians must be expunged.'¹³²

The evidence for the history of women's sexuality may be fragmentary, argues Martha Vicinus, but: 'Discontinuity and reticence do not mean silence or absence. Many lesbian histories, contradictory, complicated, and perhaps uncomfortable, can be told.'¹³³

In 1981, Lillian Faderman published Surpassing The Love Of Men, described by Sheila Jeffreys as 'a foundation for all other lesbian-feminist history writing.'¹³⁴ Faderman's work is important to Waters' project as it highlights the ways in which women were able to negotiate the constraints of a restrictive nineteenth century, as Waters' protagonists

¹³¹ Rebecca Jennings, A Lesbian History of Britain: Love and Sex between Women since 1500 (Oxford: Greenwood World Publishing, 2007) p.xi.

¹³² Lesbian History Group, Not a Passing Phase: Reclaiming Lesbians in History 1840-1985. 1993 (London: The Women's Press Ltd., 1989) 3.

¹³³ Martha Vicinus, "'They wonder to which sex I belong': The Historical Roots of the Modern Lesbian Identity" Lesbian Subjects ed. Martha Vicinus. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996) 238.

¹³⁴ Sheila Jeffreys, "Does It Matter If They Did It?" Lesbian History Group, Not a Passing Phase: Reclaiming Lesbians in History 1840-1985. 1993. (London: The Women's Press Ltd., 1989) 27.

demonstrate. In Surpassing The Love Of Men , Faderman explores how passionate female friendships were a vital part of the lives of middle-class women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. While a woman was unable to trust men outside her family, through a relationship with another woman, Faderman observes, she could find ‘emotional sustenance and not fear betrayal.’¹³⁵ Letters and diaries of these women often revealed lifelong same-sex friendships and passionate declarations of love. She questions why this love, apparently once ‘universally condoned’, became ‘condemned’.¹³⁶

Faderman points out that romantic friendship was accepted in England and America until the turn of the century when the late nineteenth century sexologists’ theories became widespread, nevertheless, ‘there were already suggestions of protest in the 1840s and throughout the century from a few writers who felt that love between women might replace marital love.’¹³⁷ This disapproval surfaced at the point when women began to show signs of gaining independence and is a backdrop to all of Waters’ Victorian novels. The condemnation of these relationships was not simply to do with sexual expression, Faderman argues:

It was rather that love between women, coupled with their emerging freedom, might conceivably bring about the overthrow of heterosexuality – which has meant not only sex between men and women but patriarchal culture, male dominance, and female subservience.¹³⁸

¹³⁵ Lillian Faderman, Surpassing the Love of Men First Perennial Edition 2001. (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1998) 411.

¹³⁶ Lillian Faderman, Surpassing the Love of Men First Perennial Edition 2001. (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1998) 14.

¹³⁷ Lillian Faderman, Surpassing the Love of Men First Perennial Edition 2001. (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1998) 238.

¹³⁸ Lillian Faderman, Surpassing the Love of Men First Perennial Edition 2001. (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1998) 238

At the start of the 1980s, Adrienne Rich published ‘Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence’, an influential article which points out that lesbians have lived with little access to a history or any sense of continuity. Rich refers to a history of female resistance which has been ‘fragmented’ and ‘erased’¹³⁹ and argues that *all* women are part of a lesbian continuum. She employs these terms to suggest an ongoing presence throughout history:

‘*Lesbian existence* suggests both the fact of the historical presence of lesbians and our continuing creation of the meaning of that existence. I mean the term *lesbian continuum* to include a range – through each woman’s life and throughout history – of woman-identified experience; not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman.’¹⁴⁰

The idea of a lesbian continuum was seen as problematic by some, however. Sheila Jeffreys suggested that not all women shared lesbian experience or oppression:

So long as we keep the definition of lesbianism open enough to include heterosexual women who love their women friends, it will be hard to articulate what is specific about the experience and oppression of lesbians and to develop the strength to fight compulsory heterosexuality and the invisibility of lesbians.¹⁴¹

First published in the same year as Surpassing the Love of Men, Monique Wittig’s influential article, ‘One Is Not Born a Woman,’ built on the ideas of Simone de Beauvoir who, in her 1949 work The Second Sex, had argued: ‘One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.’¹⁴²

¹³⁹ Adrienne Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence” Signs 5.4 (Summer 1980) 647.

¹⁴⁰ Adrienne Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence” Signs 5.4 (Summer 1980) 648.

¹⁴¹ Sheila Jeffreys, “Does It Matter If They Did It?” Lesbian History Group, Not a Passing Phase: Reclaiming Lesbians in History 1840-1985. 1993 (London: The Women’s Press Ltd., 1989) 22.

¹⁴² Simone de Beauvoir, The Second Sex, 1949. Trans. H.M.Parshley, 1953 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972) 295.

Wittig argues that a lesbian society reveals that the categories of 'woman' and 'man' are political and economic and not eternal. She draws a distinction between 'women', which she describes as the class from within which women fight for its disappearance, and 'woman' the myth: 'For "woman" does not exist for us: it is only an imaginary formation, while "women" is the product of a social relationship.'¹⁴³

Lesbianism, argues Wittig, is, for the moment, the only way in which women can live freely:

Lesbian is the only concept I know of which is beyond the categories of sex (woman and man), because the designated subject (lesbian) is *not* a woman, either economically, or politically, or ideologically. For what makes a woman is a specific social relation to a man, a relation that we have previously called servitude, a relation which implies personal and physical obligation as well as economic obligation...¹⁴⁴

The idea of the subservience of women to men, voiced in the late twentieth century, is often seen as characteristic of Victorian times when women had no franchise and were liable to be mythologized as angel of the house or whore. Waters' Victorian heroines are regularly depicted attempting to resist personal, physical and economic obligations to men.

The theories of Judith Butler resonate throughout Waters' novels, questioning received notions of sexuality and gender in the present and the past. Building on the work of Foucault, she argues that gender as well as sexuality is created through discourse. Butler describes gender as performatively produced; however the individual may experience it as something "natural". Gender is not a noun, she argues, gender is something that we *do* rather than something that we *are*: 'In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a

¹⁴³ Monique Wittig, The Straight Mind and other essays (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1992) 15-16.

¹⁴⁴ Monique Wittig, The Straight Mind and other essays (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1992) 20.

subject who might be said to pre-exist the deed.’¹⁴⁵ There is no gender that exists behind the expressions of gender: ‘...that identity is performatively constituted by the very “expressions” that are said to be its results.’¹⁴⁶

Waters’ novels all problematize rigid definitions of gender, presenting it as fluid and malleable. When Nan King passes as a rent boy in Tipping the Velvet, she subverts the concept of a physiological basis for gender and sexuality, while Selina Dawes’ amorphous spirit-world in Affinity provides a metaphor for Butler’s concept of the fluidity of gender.

Waters’ stories begin in the nineteenth century as a Kent oyster girl stands in the centre of Leicester Square and exclaims with delight and fear at the ambiguity of the city. The map snakes through the West end with its mix of music halls and rent boys, to Sue Trinder’s kitchen, backing onto ‘a small dark court’¹⁴⁷ and a network of crooked passages leading down to the river. It winds on to ‘dusty broken unpaved’¹⁴⁸ Holywell Street, the home of the erotic book trade and through the gauze of smog to the gates of Millbank prison, beside the brown river. But it also takes us to the East End, to spaces where women can meet, walk and

¹⁴⁵ Judith Butler, Gender Trouble (New York: Routledge, 1999) 33.

¹⁴⁶ Judith Butler, Gender Trouble (New York: Routledge, 1999) 33.

¹⁴⁷ Sarah Walters, Fingersmith (London: Virago, 2002) 10.

¹⁴⁸ Sarah Walters, Fingersmith (London: Virago, 2002) 375.

dress as they wish. It pauses at Victoria Park where socialists and suffragettes can look to a new future and re-draw their map again.

Central to Waters' project are the liminal, or marginal, places and spaces of the city, where her protagonists can take on the anonymity that allows for exploration of sexuality, class and gender roles. London is foregrounded as a key liminal space that offers possibilities for transformation.

Elizabeth Wilson argues that urban life historically offered women more opportunities than rural life in the nineteenth century:

These opportunities were often tantalisingly unfulfilled, offset by counter-influences of exploitation, exclusion and a harsh sexual morality; nevertheless, urbanisation provided one plank in the gradual emancipation of women.¹⁴⁹

Therefore the city is a site of possibilities for women. Its ambiguous spaces can become sites of resistance for women against the 'officially sanctioned' society. London, with its teeming streets, music halls and markets, is a liminal site where 'transgressive' sexualities can flourish. These are spaces which allow for the voices of marginalized groups. In Waters' work there is a sense of in-between states, an awareness of being on the edge of change. She is dealing with transitional times, assuming a voice of the late nineteenth century, from the perspective of the late twentieth and twenty-first.

¹⁴⁹ Elizabeth Wilson, The Contradictions of Culture (London: Sage, 2001) 67.

Tipping The Velvet

The figure of Nan King, standing under the statue of Shakespeare in Leicester Square becomes a metaphor for women's history, in Tipping the Velvet. Like all Waters' key protagonists, Nan has to find a way of negotiating the public and private spaces of the city in order to grow. She will discover how to traverse the boundaries of gender and sexuality, as well as those of the London streets.

Elizabeth Wilson refers to a 'long-developed attempt in Western society to mark the division between public and private more and more clearly and strictly. In practice this results in intermediate zones that are not so defined.'¹⁵⁰ It is these intermediate zones that allow women to explore and are ever-present in Waters' fiction. In spite of struggling to find their own way in the face of restrictive attitudes towards women and sexuality, her protagonists are depicted as negotiating their way through the city with confidence.

The backs of buildings, the underside of the city are: 'interstitial or indeterminate spaces'¹⁵¹ - spaces in between that allow the disenfranchised to explore. Tipping The Velvet, Affinity and Fingersmith all present a range of London's interstitial spaces. All of them challenge the 'officially' accepted face of the city. All question the rigid nineteenth century classification of woman as either angel of the house or prostitute. In all of these representations of the city, the

¹⁵⁰ Elizabeth Wilson, The Contradictions of Culture (London: Sage, 2001) 141.

¹⁵¹ Elizabeth Wilson, The Contradictions of Culture (London: Sage, 2001) 151.

women are re-claiming their share of the carnival, and challenging stereotyped categorization. Wilson argues that, 'The distinction between the private, sexualised space and the public desexualised space is ever-present, yet it is constantly breached.'¹⁵² This is evident in the London music hall. An intermediate zone, it provides public entertainment, yet is also a meeting place for renters and gay girls. This ambiguous space, a place on the margin, offers Nan the opportunity to explore her sexuality.

In Canterbury, Nan sings along with Kitty '...not loudly and carelessly like the rest of the crowd, but softly, almost secretly'.(25) When she gets to London, she is able to swagger beside Kitty on the stage and sing with gusto. Judith Walkowitz points out that: 'The presence of women, as performers and members of the audience ready to rebut male pretensions, transformed the atmosphere of the halls, forcefully contributing to their multivocal effect.'¹⁵³ In the halls, women's voices are being heard as well as men's.

Nan's foray into what appears to be the more 'established' part of town, St. John's Wood, still takes her to a site which is home to a marginalized group. Diana's home is both public and private. Everything goes on 'behind closed doors'. It is isolated and bourgeois. However, the site is 'public', too, since it is regularly on show, hosting extravagant parties. It is ambiguous, allowing the women to express themselves together sexually, yet only available for women of a particular class. Nan may seem to be living freely, however she is a servant just like all the others in the house, and this is made clear to her when Diana abruptly

¹⁵² Elizabeth Wilson, *The Contradictions of Culture* (London: Sage, 2001) 142.

¹⁵³ Judith R. Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight* (London: Virago 1992) 45.

dismisses and despatches her to her own room when she is weary of her, with the words ‘You may go, Nancy ... I wish to sleep alone tonight.’ (262)

In order to explore the city, the women have to learn how to negotiate London’s streets. It is the uncertain spaces that offer sites of resistance for women. Before she can map her way around the city, Nan has to learn to ‘stroll before the footlights...’ (122) of the music hall. She has to learn to negotiate the space of the stage and of the streets.

Nan King’s first view of London is from a carriage travelling along the Strand. Her elevated ride takes in: ‘Nelson on his pillar, and the fountains, and the lovely, bone-coloured front of the National Gallery, and the view down Whitehall to the Houses of Parliament.’ (64) All are images of ‘official’ London, marvelled at by the innocent Nan, who has rarely ventured further than her father’s Whitstable oyster bar. Water, her guide, excitedly points out the city’s theatres and music halls, ‘alternative’ monuments to ‘variety’: Her Majesty’s, The Haymarket, The Criterion and the London Pavilion. He is awe-struck:

And finally,’ he said – and here he removed his hat entirely, and held it in his lap – ‘finally the Empire and the Alhambra, the handsomest music halls in England, where every artiste is a star, and the audience is so distinguished that even the gay girls in the gallery – if you’ll pardon my French, Miss Butler, Miss Astley – wear furs, and pearls, and diamonds. (65)

They gaze wonderingly at the impressive facades of the two halls. Ironically, however, behind the Empire’s ‘columns’ and ‘glinting cressets’ bathed in a ‘soft electric glow’,(65) is another world, the world of shadows and illicit liaisons, inadvertently hinted at by Walter.

Dagmar Kift writes that *The Empire* was in the heart of Leicester Square, one of the main centres of prostitution in the nineteenth century, so: ‘Inevitably the hall became a haunt of high-class prostitutes who would parade up and down its promenade every evening plying their trade to wealthy visitors.’¹⁵⁴ Here the novel offers an early juxtaposition of the official and unofficial, the legitimate and illegitimate. Nan has moved into a city of flux, of shifting boundaries, to become part of the music hall, a place of illusion, disguise and transformation.

Naive and inexperienced she may be, but early on Nan is able to articulate the ambiguities of the city. On her first view of Leicester Square, she exclaims: ‘I had not known that there was such a place as this, at all – this place that was so squalid and so splendid, so ugly and so grand...’ (66)

From her vantage point in the carriage, elevated above the crowd, London seems too fast and loud to Nan: ‘...so deafening and dizzying was the clatter of the traffic, so swift the passage of the horses.’ (64) It is only on stepping down from the brougham that she is able to begin sampling the flavours of the street. The process of *walking* in the square leads to a slower pace, a chance to observe the minutiae, instead of the monuments. Nan is able to view at close quarters the multicultural city that she could not experience from her elevated position in the carriage:

There were black men, and Chinamen, and Italians and Greeks. There were newcomers to the city, gazing about them as dazed and confounded as I; and there were people curled on steps and benches, people in clothes that were crumpled or stained, who looked as if they spent all their daylight hours here – and all their dark ones, too. (66)

¹⁵⁴ Dagmar Kift, *The Victorian Music Hall* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 162.

Michel de Certeau points to the difference between viewing the city from above, distanced as a voyeur, and the experience of the ‘ordinary practitioners of the city’ who live ‘down below’. He writes: ‘They walk – an elementary form of this experience of the city;’¹⁵⁵ and it is only through walking the city streets that, later in the novel, Nan is able to begin her journey of discovery.

Before the girls leave seaside for city, Kitty remarks to Nan that ‘London will be strange.’ (55) For Nan, this will be particularly so, having spent all her days in a small town. She knows all the streets of Whitstable and, through living in the town’s oyster bar, most of its inhabitants, too. She can no more imagine London than ‘Africa, or the moon.’ (54)

Peter Ackroyd writes that by 1870 the sheer numbers in the city were overwhelming.

The fact that by the mid-nineteenth century no Londoner could ever know all of the city thoroughly was ‘a source of anxiety’.¹⁵⁶ The city can be mapped, writes Ackroyd, ‘but it can never be fully imagined. It must be taken on faith, not reason.’¹⁵⁷ That, however, is part of the excitement for Nan who has lived in a small seaside town until her arrival in the city. She is overwhelmed by the possibilities it offers.

¹⁵⁵ Michel de Certeau, “Walking in the City” The Cultural Studies Reader ed. Simon During (London: Routledge, 1993) 153.

¹⁵⁶ Peter Ackroyd, London, The Biography (Chatto: London, 2002) 587.

¹⁵⁷ Peter Ackroyd, London, The Biography (Chatto: London, 2002) 587.

Elizabeth Wilson suggests that it is probably better not to try to know or control the whole city: 'Perhaps we should be happier in our cities if we were to respond to them as nature or dreams: as objects of exploration, investigation or interpretation, settings for voyages of discovery.'¹⁵⁸ It is when Nan starts to understand the ambiguities of the city that she realises that this is what the city affords: a continuing journey of discoveries, the offer of transformations and dreams. London offers the known and the unknown, pleasure and danger, epitomised by her strolls through Leicester Square in guardsman's uniform.

In her autobiography of Vesta Tilley, Sara Maitland writes that the act of cross-dressing itself 'challenged the 'official' and accepted rationalism of Tilley's time, even if she herself didn't intentionally set out to do this.'¹⁵⁹ The ambiguity of her appearance lead her audience to ask questions about how gender was determined.

As they swagger across the stages of London, Nan and Kitty are admired by boys and girls alike. Girls gather at the stage door and send letters declaring their love. Boys blush and are flattered by their attentions. Nan and Kitty take on a range of different characters – guardsman, gent and swell. Kitty sings in a fine black tail coat, situating herself in the city through her tune: 'In a house, in a square, in a quadrant,' she sang, 'In a street, inn a lane, in a road; Turn to the left, on the right hand, You see there my true love's abode.'⁽¹⁰⁹⁾

¹⁵⁸ Elizabeth Wilson, The Sphinx in the City (London, Virago, 1991) 10.

¹⁵⁹ Sarah Maitland, Vesta Tilley (London:Virago, 1986) 88.

The cross-dressing of the ‘masher’ highlights gender as something which is performative. It is not an indication of who we *are*, but of what we *do*. Judith Butler cites the example of cross-dressing as a way of displaying the fictitiousness of gender, arguing: ‘The view that gender is performative sought to show that what we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylisation of the body.’¹⁶⁰ Cheryl A. Wilson links the male impersonator on the Victorian stage to the New Woman. Both were ‘subject to scrutiny and satire.’¹⁶¹ And both posed a threat to established gender boundaries.

The performativity of gender is apparent when plans are made for Nan to join the act. Initially, she looks too much like a boy. She needs to appear ambiguous. (118) She is:

‘...clad not exactly as a boy but, rather confusingly, as the boy I would have been, had I been more of a girl.’ (120) The description of Nan donning men’s clothes, the attention to detail, the pins and tucks, the bows on the shoes, emphasise the ‘putting on’ of gender. The elaborate learning of the moves, gestures and swaggers only serves to underline this. Butler argues that ‘sex’ is ‘part of a regulatory practice that produces the bodies it governs,’¹⁶²

¹⁶⁰ Judith Butler, Gender Trouble (New York: Routledge, 1999) xv.

¹⁶¹ Wilson, Cheryl A., “From the Drawing Room to the Stage: Performing Sexuality in Sarah Water's *Tipping the Velvet*.” Women's Studies (35. 2006) 294.

¹⁶² Judith Butler, Gender Trouble (New York: Routledge, 1999) xv.

George Sand, a famous exponent of cross-dressing, wrote in 1831 that she needed simply to be alone in the street, to listen, see and accumulate ideas. Belinda Jack observes:

What she delighted in most, however, were her hobnailed boots, the hard male footwear of the day. They quickly took on symbolic importance, and attained the status of an essential metonym...above all they allowed her free movement.¹⁶³

When Nan goes back into the city in women's clothes, she longs for this freedom as she complains: 'I might as well be stumbling through Clerkenwell in no clothes at all.'(191) She is stared at, called names and at least twice seized, stroked and punched by men. She is in a city where 'girls walked only to be gazed at.'(191)

Nan has regularly swaggered across the music hall stage in a gent's suit, owning that space. Surely, then, to see the West End of London as just another theatrical space in which to perform is not so far away. Like Sand, she discovers the freedoms that male attire offers when she decides to don her old guardsman's garb. Dressed as a man, '...the glances did not settle on me: they only slithered past me, to the girls behind.'(194) and she feels she is the subject and not the object of the gaze.

Ironically though, Nan soon realizes that she *has* unwittingly become the object, too, when approached by a moustachioed gent in the Burlington Arcade. However, she does not feel belittled by this; on the contrary, she is revenged and empowered. Her foolish clients are 'gulled and humbled'(206) As in her music hall career, the watcher will pay her and this, in turn, gives her some level of independence.

¹⁶³ Belinda Jack, *George Sand, A Woman's Life Writ Large* (New York: Knopf, 2000)162.

Before long Nan becomes aware that the world of the music hall and that of the rent boy are not so different: 'Both have London as their proper country, the West End as their Capital. Both are a curious mix of magic and necessity, glamour and sweat.(203) In order to perfect her performance, as she did when starting the act with Kitty, she wanders and watches, '...to learn the ways and gestures of the world into which I had stumbled.'(201) Both of these mixtures of 'magic and sweat', however, serve to question traditional gender assumptions, presenting the concept as a construct. Throughout the novel there are many more examples of women dressing in a way which highlights this performativity. By the end of the novel Nan is starting to understand how to move across boundaries. We see her learning to adapt in a mixture of trousers and skirts, in public houses and speaking at a socialist rally in Victoria Park, railing against the inequality and poverty in the city.

At the point at which Nan has sunk to her lowest and is almost dead of self-neglect, it is the polyphony of the city, offering endless possibilities that calls her to live again:

I hauled open the window of my room, and leaned out into the dark – into the never-quite-dark of the London night, with its sounds and its scents that, for so long, I had been shut from. I thought, I will go out into the world again; I will go back into the city – they have kept me from it long enough! (190)

However, she has to find a way of owning the streets as a woman. At first it's in drag, as a rent boy, in the final scenes it's as a speech-maker for workers' rights, putting the argument for socialism and against poverty and the workhouse. She is urging the crowd to join unions and campaign for women's suffrage.

The novel deals with how Nan negotiates the city streets and the perceived boundaries between ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’. She finds her way through them on an often picaresque journey of discovery. By the time she reaches the East End, she is walking with more confidence, but Waters is not presenting lesbianism as simply substitute for the inequality of heterosexuality. As Cora Kaplan maintains, ‘lesbian romance is fraught with its own power relations and emotional violence.’¹⁶⁴

The figure of the flâneur is a constant motif throughout the novel, appearing the first time Kitty Butler appears on the Canterbury stage. She strolls onto the boards ‘like a boy’ (13) and ‘...her songs were all of champagne suppers and strolling in the Burlington Arcade.’ (25) Later, Nan joins her in the role of a West End swell, wandering the arcades in lavender gloves: ‘Then we tried some of Kitty’s songs...about strolling through Piccadilly with a pocket full of sovereigns and all the ladies look, and smile, and wink their eyes.’ (116) In order to make their impersonations more effective, the pair are instructed by Walter to watch the men in Piccadilly. They spend hours ‘...in shops and market squares and stations *studying the men*.’ (86) They stroll and stare: ‘...and we learned together the constable’s amble, the coster’s weary swagger, the smart clip of the off-duty soldier.’ (86)

¹⁶⁴ Cora Kaplan, Victoriana: histories, fictions, criticisms (Edinburgh: Cromwell Press, 2007) 111-2.

The ideas of feminists who have argued that there could never be a female flâneur have been questioned by Elizabeth Wilson. They have argued, says Wilson, that the urban scene was traditionally represented through the male gaze, 'In paintings and photographs men voyeuristically stare, women are passively subjected to their gaze.'¹⁶⁵ Wilson points out that this argument has tended to be overstated. In Paris, in particular, women participated actively as well as passively in the spectacle. She cites Baudelaire's link between flâneurs and prostitutes. When Nan ends up strolling the streets around Leicester Square as a renter, she seems to be in the role of flâneur, wandering the streets in her guardsman's uniform, watching the crowds:

Walking and watching, indeed, are the world's keynotes: you walk, and let yourself be looked at; you watch, until you find a face or a figure that you fancy; there is a nod, a wink, a shake of the head, a purposeful stepping to an alley or a rooming house... (201)

But Nan is no longer distanced from the throng. She is moving more freely through the streets, but she has now become a saleable commodity, on the look-out for a man who will part with his money. In spite of this, however, she feels in some way in control:

Now, however, I grasped it very well – and I trembled again, as I did so, with satisfaction and spite. I had first donned trousers to avoid men's eyes; to feel myself the object of *these* men's gazes, however, these men who thought I was like them, *like that* – well, that was not to be pestered; it was to be, in some queer way, *revenged*. (200)

She is choosing to be watched – a reversal of gender expectations. The fact that she is a woman adds another layer to the role and enables her to exact revenge. Still, however, she has to negotiate the streets in 'role'.

¹⁶⁵ Elizabeth Wilson, The Sphinx in the City (London, Virago, 1991) 56.

Janet Woolf argues that formal accounts do not convey how women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries *were* able to negotiate the streets: ‘...the dominant discourses render invisible women’s city, which a different discourse would entirely re-write.’¹⁶⁶

On finding her way to the East End, Nan discovers one of the pockets of the city that allows women to negotiate the streets without feeling threatened. She has ‘come out’ to Flo and, as if to celebrate, they are to go to ‘The Boy in the Boat’, a public house near Cable Street, with a ladies room in it. Wearing a skirt and a gentleman’s shirt and collar, ever ambiguous, she strolls through the streets of Bethnal Green:

I knew the route, for I had walked it often with Florence: I knew which courts were grimmest, which factories sweated their workers hardest, which tenements housed the saddest and most hopeless families. But we were out that night together – as Florence herself had admitted – for pleasure’s sake; and though it might seem strange to say it, our journey was indeed a pleasant one, and seemed to take us over a rather different landscape to the one we normally trod. (413)

This scene is a celebration of women walking in London. It is their city. They see the minutiae, the ‘spooning couples’ and ‘girls with cherries on their hats, and lips to match them...’ (413) They see the gin palaces and seedy bars as non-threatening. They have ownership of the city. They are able to negotiate it. The East End is ‘luminous with warmth and light and colour’. Nan no longer needs to walk in disguise. It is the night she and Flo become lovers. The use of colour in this extract - ‘a boy in a yellow felt jacket that was bright, in the Brick Lane shadows, as a lantern’ (414) - adds to the atmosphere of hope and endless possibilities.

¹⁶⁶Janet Woolf, “The artist and the *flâneur*; Rodin, Rilke and Gwen John in Paris” *The Flâneur* ed. Keith Tester (London: Routledge, 1994) 129.

Tipping The Velvet has been described as a journey ‘towards communality’ by Emily Jeremiah,¹⁶⁷ and certainly the end of the novel with its socialist gathering is reminiscent, as Cora Kaplan suggests, of a 1980s Greater London Council rally.¹⁶⁸ However, as Jeremiah points out, the image of collective lesbian identity is affirmed but it is not ‘unquestioningly or simplistically embraced’ in the novel.¹⁶⁹ Nevertheless, Nan finds love and an awareness of her history and the Victoria Park rally signals a new beginning. Lillian Faderman observes:

Perhaps for romantic friends of other eras their relationship was also a political act, although much more covert: With each other they could escape from many of the externally imposed demands of femininity that were especially stringent throughout much of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. They could view themselves as human beings and prime rather than as the second sex.¹⁷⁰

Nan’s journey is metaphorical as well as physical. The city is a state of mind. London is both malevolent and benevolent, depending on how you choose to see it and that depends on where you are. She makes the choice to see it as benevolent, to respond to the city, as Wilson suggests, as the setting for a voyage of discovery. Nan’s view of the city as something nurturing, rather than threatening, begins when she runs away from Kitty and starts to gain her independence. The streets seem to protect her, to allow her the anonymity she needs: ‘London absorbed me; and for a little while I ceased, entirely, to think.’ (177)

¹⁶⁷ Jeremiah, Emily, “‘The "I" inside "her"”: Queer Narration in Sarah Water’s Tipping the Velvet and Wesley Stace’s Misfortune” Women: a cultural review (18.2 2007)139.

¹⁶⁸ Cora Kaplan, Victoriana: histories, fictions, criticisms (Edinburgh: Cromwell Press, 2007)122.

¹⁶⁹ Jeremiah, Emily, “‘The "I" inside "her"”: Queer Narration in Sarah Water’s Tipping the Velvet and Wesley Stace’s Misfortune” Women: a cultural review (18.2 2007)139.

¹⁷⁰ Lillian Faderman, Surpassing the Love of Men First Perennial Edition 2001. (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1998) 413-4.

Nick Rennison points to what he considers the greater sophistication of Waters' later novel, Fingersmith, arguing that: 'In *Tipping the Velvet* Waters undermined the picaresque tradition to create what remained a relatively straightforward period romp.'¹⁷¹ Certainly, the shifting narrative and dual narrators of the later novels are yet to appear, however Tipping the Velvet is anything but 'straightforward'. The novel is imbued with post-modern theory, problematizing received ideas of gender and sexuality and subversively giving a voice to those who have been traditionally silenced. As Mark Wormald argues, none of Waters' novels are Victorian reproductions, rather: '...in Waters' hands they manage to escape the limitations of the genres which inspired them.'¹⁷²

The women in Tipping the Velvet have begun to claim their share of the carnival. Nan is learning as she negotiates the London highways that her city is both marvellous and squalid, but it is this ambiguity that creates the potential for change.

¹⁷¹ Nick Rennison, Contemporary British Novelists (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005) 182.

¹⁷² Mark Wormald, 'Prior Knowledge: Sarah Waters and the Victorians' British Fiction Today ed. Rod Mengham & Philip Tew (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2006) 187.

Affinity

By one, and one, the bolts full easy slide:-
The chains lie silent on the footworn stones;-
The key turns, and the door upon its hinges groans.

John Keats, "The Eve of St. Agnes"¹⁷³

Affinity is set in a London of shadows and half-light, a sprawling misty city of the mid-1870s, with its yellow fogs that stream along Great Russell Street to the dark and restless Thames. In well-to-do Cheyney Walk, there are supper parties and young girls seeking wealthy husbands, while on the street corners crouch huddled beggars. And just along the river there is Millbank, the brooding prison, shaped like a sinister flower – a regimented city whose inhabitants are forever isolated and obedient, forever observed.

Affinity opens with the journal of Selina Dawes, a spiritualist medium imprisoned for fraud and assault. The narrative voice moves back and forth between Selina and Margaret, the recently bereaved and confused prison visitor who is falling in love with her. This is the hidden history of women told in the voices of the marginalized and the dispossessed.

¹⁷³ Keats Poetical Works ed. H.W. Garrod (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978) 206.

The narrative is presented in the form of journal entries from Selina and Margaret. This first-person perspective gives a sense of intimacy to the text and gives women a direct voice. The reader feels party to the diarist's ideas and emotions. The dual perspective also questions the authority of the single, middle-class narrator, Margaret, as it moves between her diary and the journals of Selina Dawes. The novel focuses on the re-writing of women's history and is full of women's diverse stories, from prison warders and inmates to spiritualists and 'spinsters' – all dispossessed characters living on the edges of society.

The academic discipline of History was the occupation and passion of Margaret Prior's father. His life was spent dividing and classifying the 'great lives' and the 'great works' (7), categorizing them, 'neat and gleaming and complete, like metal letters in a box of type.' (8) The novel itself is a challenge to that kind of history.

Margaret begins *her* journal by declaring that she is attempting to make history into a coherent narrative. Before he died, her father told her '...it was only a question of deciding where the tale began, and where it ended.' (7) But Margaret finds it difficult to start writing her account of Millbank. She wonders how 'Pa' would have embarked upon it. He might have begun with the building of the gaol. Margaret tentatively considers beginning with a description of getting dressed for her first visit, but quickly reprimands herself: '- no, of course he would not start the story there, with a lady and her servant, and petticoats and loose hair.' (7)

Pa was a Historian. The petty details of women's everyday lives were *not* a fit subject for history. He recorded the lives of great men, not women's gossip and tittle-tattle. It is Pa's artificial separation of history and fiction that is the problem. 'Official' historical accounts are no more trustworthy or complete than the 'unofficial'; all are stories, some from tellers who have greater 'status' than others.

It is the small personal details, that Margaret's father would consider irrelevant, that make their way into Margaret's journal and illuminate the story of women at this time. She describes being led through a narrow arch on her way into the prison, but observes:

...I am obliged to pause a little to fuss with my skirts, which are plain, but wide, and have caught upon some piece of jutting iron or brick. I daresay Pa would not have bothered with the detail of the skirts... (8)

Of course he wouldn't, because he would not have understood their restrictive nature – a metaphor for Margaret's everyday life as a woman at the time. Women's clothing and the limits it imposed on them was considered of no importance to a historian of her father's status. However, the importance of clothes in ascribing and policing gender is highlighted by Judith Butler when she writes: '...what we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylisation of the body.'¹⁷⁴ The argument that gender is manufactured in this way is illustrated in Tipping the Velvet, when Nan King is able to stroll freely around the West End when she is dressed as a man.

¹⁷⁴ Judith Butler, Gender Trouble (London: Routledge, 1999) xv.

Affinity questions notions of objectivity in historical discourse. Margaret is treated with respect by the staff at the British Library, not as a historian in her own right, but because she is remembered as her father's former assistant. She sits making notes on Mayhew's work on the prisons of London while her own historical journal has to be written in her room, in secret, by failing candle light, half-drugged by the chloral administered by her mother to prevent her facing her own demons. Margaret is writing a different type of prison history from that of Mayhew, one which offers a more direct account of the experiences of women prisoners and warders told from behind the cell doors, by those who have traditionally been denied a voice.

Her passionate story, unrecognised by orthodox historical accounts, contrasts strongly with the pale scribblings of the (male) readers in the British Library who, like flies in 'a paperweight of amber', are clutching 'the same limp folio of papers year upon year,' (57) (the adjective suggests a lack of any potency in their work). This experience contrasts vividly with Margaret's visit to the spiritualist library, where she reads 'unofficial' histories which seem 'alive'.

When Margaret suggests to the women prisoners that they might recount *their* stories, they don't know how to react. Susan Pilling, imprisoned for thieving, just stares at Margaret, but volunteers nothing of her history. She is used to lady visitors reading to her, offering improving stories from the Scriptures. Because the prisoners have been silenced, physically and metaphorically, for so long, they have trouble speaking when they are allowed to. Ellen Power seems to like talking to Margaret, '...yet, too, talking was troublesome to her. Her

speech was halting. She sometimes hesitated, and often licked her lips or passed her hand across them, and sometimes coughed.’ (39)

Margaret cannot fathom the reason for her strange hesitation but then recognizes - ‘...I thought again of Susan Pilling, who had also stammered and coughed and seemed to grope for ordinary words, and whom I had guessed to be only rather simple-minded.’ (39) Power tells her that the women have been silenced for so long that they have got out of the habit of talking. When they have the opportunity, they find themselves inarticulate: ‘Sometimes you wonder if your tongue ain’t shrunk up or dropped clean off.’ (40)

Margaret begins visiting Millbank as a diversion from her grief at the suggestion of Mr. Shillitoe, the prison governor and a former friend of Margaret’s late father. On her first visit he shows her around the vast fortress that is Millbank, which has its own infirmary, store rooms and chapel. Mr. Shillitoe points to the yellow chimneys, fuelled by the fires of the prison laundry, and tells her: “‘...you see, we are quite a little city here! Quite self-sustaining. We should do very well, I always think, under a siege.’” (9)

The plan of Millbank is curiously charming to Margaret: ‘...the pentagons appearing as petals on a geometric flower.’ (8) Close-to, its vast angled towers and shadows ‘the colour of bruises’ (8) suggest violence and fill her with fear. It seems to Margaret ‘as if the prison had been designed by a man in the grip of a nightmare or a madness – or had been made expressly to drive its inmates mad.’ (8)

Mr. Shillitoe tells her she will see the logic of the design from the Matron's office, a bright, circular room filled with windows at the top of a tall tower:

...and of course, I saw it at once, for the tower is set at the centre of the pentagon yards, so that the view from it is all of the walls and barred windows that make up the interior face of the women's building. (10)

The prison building is based upon the Panopticon, designed by Jeremy Bentham in 1785.

This system allowed the prisoner to potentially be watched at any time. A central tower was surrounded by individual cells, which could be observed by a guard. Michel Foucault describes the process of regulation of privacy:

By the effect of backlighting, one can observe from the tower, standing out precisely against the light, the small captive shadows in the cells of the periphery. They are like so many cages, so many small theatres, in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualized and constantly visible¹⁷⁵

The women in Millbank never know when or whether they are being watched, and so assume that they *are* and therefore police themselves. Foucault writes that the major effect of the Panopticon is 'to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power.'¹⁷⁶ Selina tells Margaret: 'All the world may look at me, it is part of my punishment.' (47) Foucault explains this idea:

The panopticon is a machine for dissociating the see/being seen dyad: in the peripheric ring, one is totally seen, without ever seeing; in the central tower, one sees everything without ever being seen.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁵ Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish (London: Penguin, 1997) 200.

¹⁷⁶ Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish (London: Penguin, 1997) 201.

¹⁷⁷ Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish (London: Penguin, 1997) 201

The women are constantly gazed at with distaste by warders and with fascination, like specimens, by visitors. There is a parallel with the experience women often face when first attempting to negotiate the streets in Waters' novels. Nan King is grabbed and stared at and feels she is walking through Clerkenwell naked; Maud Lilley is accosted and stared at on her journey to Holywell Street. They are objects of a controlling gaze, like the prisoners.

However, unlike the streets of London, there is no chance of gaining anonymity in Millbank. The prison is an extreme image of the well ordered, controlled and contained city. There is no crowd, therefore no opportunity for dissent or chances for creativity. As Foucault puts it: 'The crowd, a compact mass, a locus of multiple exchanges, individualities merging together, a collective effect, is abolished and replaced by a collection of separated individualities.'¹⁷⁸

Millbank presents an example of the extremes of modern planning and control. Elizabeth Wilson has argued that contemporary tourists often receive a very restricted view of the city. They see the 'parts cleansed, sanitised and rearranged for the delectation of the tourist gaze.'¹⁷⁹ The prison visitor's gaze is like that of the tourist. Margaret sees the detritus of the city but it has been controlled. She is invited to look at how the uncooperative have been regimented and enclosed so they present no threat. She is in a position of power. There is inequality between the prisoner and the visitor, whose gaze gives them a sense of control over the usually lower-class prisoner.

On her first visit Margaret, a 'respectable' middle-class woman, watches the inmates take exercise in circles and notes that they all move at the same dull pace. Miss Haxby, the

¹⁷⁸ Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish (London: Penguin, 1997) 201

¹⁷⁹ Elizabeth Wilson, The Contradictions of Culture (London, Sage, 2001) 146

Principal, proudly points out: ‘See how they know their places,’ she said. There must be kept a certain distance, look, between each prisoner.’ The women must keep silent, in all parts of the prison. They are forbidden to speak, to whistle, to sing, hum ‘or make any kind of voluntary noise’ unless at the express request of a matron or visitor. (14)

Mr. Shillitoe’s prison ‘city’ is sterile. It is the antithesis of grubby, thronging and vocal London. It does not contain the polyphony and self-expression of the city outside. *That* would be dangerous. Describing the prisoner, Foucault writes: ‘He is seen, but he does not see; he is the object of information, never a subject in communication.’¹⁸⁰

Miss Haxby is referred to as ‘the Argus of the gaol’, for she gazes upon them all. Margaret discovers: ‘It was impossible, on entering that room, not to long to walk at once to one of its curving windows and gaze at the view beyond it.’ (9) Haxby relishes her position of power, taking great pleasure in studying the women like so many laboratory specimens. The view from her window is of a hellish image, a warning that such a sanitized city offers nothing but sterility, a symbol of what Lynda Nead refers to as the ‘modernizing, cleansing thrust of the new city.’¹⁸¹ There is no space for transformation or growth for the inmates.

Margaret sits at her desk looking at the map of the prison and at the route she has been taken on. ‘There are three miles’ worth of such passages across the prison as a whole.’ (17) She tries to match her perceptions to her plan but cannot. As Lucie Armitt and Sarah Gamble have

¹⁸⁰ Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish (London: Penguin, 1997) 200

¹⁸¹ Lynda Nead, “Mapping the Self – Gender, Space and Modernity in London” Rewriting the Self ed. Roy Porter (Routledge: London, 1997) 182.

argued, the novel focuses on the problems of women attempting to negotiate space.¹⁸² Miss Ridley says that when the women first come to Millbank to be matrons, ‘...they put their heads upon their pillows in the night and seem to be walking, walking, walking down the same white corridor. ‘That happens for a week,’ she said. ‘After that, the matron knows her way all right. After a year, she wishes she might grow lost again, for the novelty.’(9) The predictable city of Millbank can be both mapped and known.

The voices missing from history are often the voices of spinsters, women who have no identity without a husband. Lillian Faderman points out that: ‘The “redundant” or “superfluous” women, which is what unmarried women were called in nineteenth-century England, became a social problem of vast proportions.’¹⁸³ When Margaret returns to the British Museum after a two year absence, she discovers that she has turned from a girl into a spinster in the eyes of the assistants, who now refer to her as ‘Madam’ instead of ‘Miss’. Looking about her, she notices: ‘There were many spinsters there to-day, I think – more, certainly, than I remember. Perhaps, however, it is the same with spinsters as with ghosts; and one has to be of their ranks in order to see them at all.’ (58) Terry Castle points out that the lesbian has been ‘ghosted’, too and asks:

Why is it so difficult to see the lesbian - even when she is there, quite plainly, in front of us? In part because she has been ‘ghosted’ - or made to seem invisible - by culture itself. It would be putting it mildly to say that the lesbian represents a threat to patriarchal protocol: Western civilization has for centuries been haunted by a fear of ‘women without men’ – of women indifferent or resistant to male desire.¹⁸⁴

¹⁸² Lucie Armitt & Sarah Gamble, “The haunted geometries of Sarah Water’s *Affinity*” *Textual Practice* (20.1. 2006) 148.

¹⁸³ Faderman, Lillian. *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present* First Perennial Edition 2001 (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1998) 183.

¹⁸⁴ Terry Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993) 4-5.

Her invisibility could offer Margaret some freedom, if only it did not render her irrelevant also. As a spinster, Margaret is inconsequential, defined in terms of something she is *not*. On one occasion her angry mother reminds her she is nobody without a husband. Elizabeth Wilson describes such a dilemma when she argues:

Old women and drably dressed women do become invisible, and in that invisibility – intended, whether consciously or not, as annihilation – there is a kind of negative freedom; but also a kind of social extinction.¹⁸⁵

Margaret's story is the story of many nineteenth century women. She is the clever sister who was not allowed to attend school, unlike her brother, but had to stay at home with her governess. Easily clever enough to follow him to Cambridge University, she was denied this opportunity too. Lillian Faderman describes education as the chief enemy of nineteenth-century conservative forces:

If women learned how to manage the world as well as men, if they learned about history and politics and studied for a profession, of course they would soon be demanding a voice and a role outside the home. The medical doctors soon discovered that education was dangerous to a female's health.¹⁸⁶

When her pretty younger sister marries, just before Margaret's thirtieth birthday, she is officially on the shelf: a spinster. Her mother informs her: 'Now Priscilla is married, you must take up your proper duties in the house. Your place is here, your place is here.' (252)

¹⁸⁵ Elizabeth Wilson, The Contradictions of Culture (London, Sage, 2001) 93.

¹⁸⁶ Faderman, Lillian. Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present First Perennial Edition 2001 (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1998) 235.

Margaret sees parallels between her life and those of the Millbank women, but most of them can see an end to their prison sentences, while Margaret cannot. She envisages a life growing older alongside her mother and is filled with dread:

‘I am twenty-nine. In three months’ time I shall be thirty. While Mother grows stooped and querulous, how shall I grow?

I shall grow dry and pale and paper-thin – like a leaf, pressed tight inside the pages of a dreary black book and then forgotten.’ (201)

Margaret is allowed little independence. Although she is a woman of some wealth since the death of her father, her brother still has to countersign her cheques. Her mother reminds her, ‘You are not, in fact, Mrs Anybody. You are only *Miss Prior*.’ (254) The only way out of Margaret’s incarceration is for her to marry, yet that would offer her little freedom and is an idea abhorrent to her because of her sexuality. She complains to Selina: ‘But people, I said, do not want cleverness – not in women, at least. I said, “Women are *bred* to do more of the same – that is their function. It is only ladies like me that throw the system out, make it stagger...”’ (209)

It is because women like Margaret make the system stagger that they are seen as potential threats and are silenced. Many of the prisoners in Millbank are there simply because they do not conform to the moral views of 1870s society. Some are imprisoned for prostitution, though their male clients are allowed to walk the streets freely. Others are incarcerated because they have provided abortions for women too poor to bring another child into the world, or for petty thieving in order to feed their offspring, crimes that would later become feminist issues. Some are there for attempting suicide. All are silenced, as Mr. Shillitoe explains: ‘Their tongues we still...’ (12)

Margaret empathises with the women at Millbank because she sees parallels between her life and theirs. She writes of feeling ‘...at odds with the world and all its ordinary rules...’ (315) Her sexuality is repressed and she is not allowed recognition for her own desires. Like the Millbank inmates, Margaret is also imprisoned by her non-conformity: her love for Helen was against the rules. Margaret’s mother, who she later realises has probably always been aware of her feelings for Helen, has attempted to contain and control her daughter’s wayward nature. Soon after her father’s death, she begins dosing Margaret with morphine to prevent her outbursts of emotion. She sometimes sends Margaret home when they are out, for fear that she will embarrass her in public. Margaret explains: ‘...Mother has sent me home sometimes when I have grown anxious at a theatre, thinking I should be ill and have to cry out while the hall was so still.’ (13) Mother has literally silenced her daughter, so Margaret understands what it feels like to be deprived of a voice.

However, a major part of the reason she is being silenced is because her tears are not simply for the death of her father. Helen, the girl she loves, brought forward her marriage to Margaret’s brother, Stephen, so that their dying father could be at the wedding. Margaret’s distress is rooted in Helen’s betrayal. Helen later tells Margaret that she was just not brave enough to go against society’s rules to be with her.

The apparently ‘unstable’ Margaret is constantly watched by her mother, the gaoler who would keep her in the house, just as the Millbank women are observed by the warders. Margaret confides to her journal, ‘...she has been watching me, as Miss Ridley watches, and Miss Haxby.’ (223) Margaret must write in her diary carefully and quietly as she is afraid that

her mother, who thinks the activity ‘unhealthy’, will be listening at the door. She is frightened that, ‘She might kneel and put her eye to the key-hole. I have stopped it up with cloth.’ (224)

A direct parallel is drawn here with the Millbank matrons looking through the spyhole or ‘eye’ in the heavy doors of the women’s cells.

In preventing Margaret writing her journal, her mother is suppressing her daughter’s writing of history. She stands over Margaret while she takes her chloral, which makes her too tired to continue her account. Her mother’s actions are compounded by those of the medical profession, who view her as irrational and unbalanced. When she is unable to stop weeping, a doctor is called, but he only attempts to silence her further when: ‘I told him it was my monthly time, only that. He said I must take not chloral now but laudanum, and that I must keep to the house.’ (258) Jenny Uglow comments that ‘...often the subversive energy and aberrant behaviour of women themselves has been held down by the language of madness, sickness, ‘nerves’ and irrationality.’¹⁸⁷ Margaret’s energy and desire to write is suppressed when she is constructed as a hysteric.

Mrs. Prior constantly belittles Margaret’s journal and her daughter writes guiltily, almost apologetically, surrounded by attitudes such as those from Mr. Barclay, her sister’s fiancé:

Two days ago, Priscilla put a novel aside and Mr. Barclay picked it up, and turned its pages, and laughed at it. He does not care for lady authors. All women can ever write, he says, are ‘journals of the heart’ – the phrase has stayed with me. I have been thinking of my last journal, which had so much of my own heart’s blood in it; and which certainly took as long to burn as human hearts, they say, do take. (70)

¹⁸⁷ Jenny Uglow, “Introduction” The Virago Book of Ghost Stories ed. Richard Dalby (London: Virago, 1988) xii.

Barclay, the mouthpiece for 'official' history is threatened by the novel. The threat is to his traditional male role, defined by years of sanctioned history. Novels offer the possibility of giving voice to other stories that are traditionally silenced. They tell history from the wrong side of the tracks. Rebecca Jennings observes:

Novel writing had been regarded as a respectable female occupation since the eighteenth century, but in the nineteenth century it became increasingly associated with feminism.¹⁸⁸

Fiction can question authority and present alternative societies and lives. Faced with the restrictions placed upon her, Margaret finds it hard to voice her own history as a lesbian. She writes:

...I was glad that Mr. Shillitoe knew nothing of my history. I thought, His knowing nothing, and the women's knowing nothing, that will keep that history in its place. I imagined them fastening my own past shut, with a strap and a buckle...(29)

The contrast between public and private space in Affinity is complex. Margaret feels imprisoned in her home, a supposedly private space which is, in fact, public since she is watched all the time by her family and servants. The outside world taps on her window in October 1874 when winter comes early:

There have come fogs, too – yellow fogs and brown fogs, and fogs so black they might be liquid soot – fogs that seem to rise from the pavements as if brewed in the sewers in diabolical engines. They stain our clothes, they fill our lungs and make us cough, they press against our windows – if you watch, in a certain light, you may see them seeping into the house through ill-fitting sashes. (125)

¹⁸⁸ Rebecca Jennings, A Lesbian History of Britain: Love and Sex between Women since 1500 (Oxford: Greenwood World Publishing, 2007) 63.

There is a strong paralleling of outside and inside, the safety of the home over the cruelty of the streets. Margaret is frightened of the outside seeping in through the spaces, the cracks in the window frame, or the gaps under the doors. Beyond the window is the harsh world that can only be experienced at a distance. Margaret's class may be superficially shocked by frozen beggars at the roadside, but they still look on them from above, in the safety of their carriages. Margaret hears stories of the poor secondhand, from the servants: 'There was a mother and her three sons found starved and frozen to death, Ellis told me, across the river from here, two nights ago.' (125) Mother does not like her walking about the streets alone, nor does she approve of her prison visiting. There is an unspoken fear of the unknown. The reality of the streets is not to be faced by lone women - better to bar the doors against it, advises Mother.

There is much that is silenced in the house – Margaret's love affair with Helen, grief at the death of her father and her relationship with her mother. She is given chloral to erase her past which threatens the compulsory heterosexuality of the family. Margaret asks Helen:

'If they expect it to be hard, why don't they change things, to allow it to be easier? I feel, if I might only have a little liberty –'

Liberty, she asked me then, to do what? (203)

Margaret claims she wants liberty but is at the same time afraid of it. She pushes wads of paper into the window sashes in an attempt to prevent the outside air creeping in and stifling her. She is imprisoned in her life as much as Selina is in the jail.

When she *does* venture out from the British Museum into the fog, Margaret finds it curiously liberating. ‘I didn’t mind it. I thought it even rather marvellous, to emerge from the museum, and find the day become so grey and thick and so unreal.’(126) When she starts to walk she discovers that she is not swallowed up by the fog at all. The public streets offer her the freedom she has craved. They allow her anonymity and respite from the controlling gaze she encounters at home. She becomes part of the crowd, invisible in the fog. She describes the experience as liberating:

Of course, it is the nature of fog to appear denser from a distance. I did not grow vaguer, but stayed as sharp as ever. There might have been a dome about me then, that moved when I did – a dome of gauze, I saw it very clearly, it was the kind that servants set on plates of summer cakes to keep the wasps from them. (126)

After leaving the prison on her second visit, when she has spoken to the women for the first time, Margaret wants to walk, after the claustrophobia of the wards. The porter goes to call her a cab, but she stops him and, instead, walks the length of the embankment. Mother has been watching her from the house: ‘How long was it, she wanted to know, that I had been going about the city on foot? She had been about to send Ellis over for me.’ (51) It is not appropriate for a single, middle-class woman to be walking the streets of London alone for so long. Margaret talks wistfully to Selina of Italy, where ‘The people there are easy and frank. Englishwomen may walk freely, I think, about the streets there – quite freely.’ (212)

When the family have gone to her sister's house, leaving her alone in London, she has more freedom than ever before. She walks in the city without anyone deciding for her whether it is appropriate, or for how long she should be out:

I went from the cemetery to the centre of the city, and then I walked from street to street, looking at all the things I shall not see again, perhaps for many years. I walked from two o'clock until half-past six. (307)

Gender roles are rigidly defined in Margaret's world, but the novel presents a challenge to the assumption that gender is innate. This is apparent in its depiction of late-nineteenth-century spiritualism, which Rachel Carroll describes as 'a performative space in which the incoherence of normative sexual identities are materialized allows for a rethinking of the "origins" of both sexual desire and of modern sexual identities.'¹⁸⁹ Selina's description of a world where there are no women or men, just spirits, is a metaphor for a society in which gender is not rigidly policed, unlike 1870s London. Selina asks:

'When we rise,' she said, 'do you think we take our earth-features with us? It is only new, bewildered spirits that look about them for the things of the flesh. When guides come to them, the spirits gaze at them and don't know how to talk to them – they say "Are you a man, or a lady?" But the guides are neither, and both; and the spirits are neither, and both. It is only when they have understood that, that they are ready to be taken higher.' (209 – 210)

This is a utopian view of a world where the 'gendered stylisation of the body'¹⁹⁰, described by Judith Butler, no longer exists. The image that Selina creates implies that gender is performative, a masquerade. She argues for a fluidity to enable women to leave behind the symbols of the earth, so often attached to them:

¹⁸⁹ Rachel Carroll, "Rethinking Generational History: Queer Histories of Sexuality in Neo-Victorian Feminist Fiction" Studies in the Literary Imagination (39.2. Fall 2006) 136.

¹⁹⁰ Judith Butler, Gender Trouble (London: Routledge, 1999) xv.

She said then that, it was doing the same thing always that kept us “bound to the earth”; that we were made to rise from it, but would never do that until we *changed*. As for *women* and *men*, she said – well, that was the first thing that must be cast off. (209)

Margaret protests that the spirit world must be chaotic, without distinction or love, but Selina retorts that it promises freedom:

‘It is a world that is *made* of love. Did you think there is only the kind of love your sister knows for her husband? Did you think there must be here, a man with whiskers, and over here, a lady in a gown? Haven’t I said, there are no whiskers and gowns where spirits are?’ (210)

To be of the spirit world is to be free to express one’s sexuality without being judged against strict heterosexual criteria. According to Mr. Hither of the Spiritualist Library that Margaret visits, the spirit-world is classless, too. He tells her that the spirits have no time for ‘age or station’. (132)

The class divisions in society are challenged by Selina, too, when she encourages Margaret to pour out her emotions during her visit. Margaret exclaims, ‘I had come to her, thinking only of her, and she had thrust my own weak self at me again. She looked at me and her eyes had pity in them!’ (88) Selina turns the tables, watches her and listens to her story. Margaret’s position of power as lady visitor and observer is subverted by the young medium. Behind the prison doors, class roles are reversed and displayed as a construct, as in Fingersmith. When Selina sends Margaret the velvet collar that she used to wear Margaret puts it on and again the roles are reversed: ‘I stood at the glass and fastened it about my throat. It fits, but tightly: I feel its grip, as my heart pulses, as if she holds the thread to which it is fastened and sometimes pulls it, to remind me she is near. (294) The prisoner has power and it is as if

Margaret is her little dog that she can control. Like an artefact in a gothic novel, it seems to Margaret that the collar has supernatural powers.

Affinity is full of gothic elements, not least in the image of Millbank itself. The prison is like a gothic castle, surrounded by swirling fogs in the twilight. Staring up at the building on a winter's evening, the Porter observes: ‘ “She’s a grim old creature, ain’t she, miss?” he said, nodding towards the gleaming walls, the lampless windows. “A terrible creature – though I say it, who is her keeper.” ’ (312)

Inside the prison its dark passageways are labyrinthine, with shifting shadows and figures materializing from the gloom. Margaret describes the route from the chain room with its handcuffs and hobbles to The Darks, where women are incarcerated in solitary confinement:

...we left that ghastly chamber to proceed further along the passage until we reached a low, stone archway. Beyond this point the walls were barely wider than our skirts. There were no gas-jets, only a single lighted candle in a sconce, which Miss Haxby seized and held before us as we walked... (180)

The gothic genre is an appropriate choice for the story of Margaret, a privileged woman who, in 1874, longs to break free from the chains of conventional gender boundaries. The gothic can lead the reader along dark tunnels and winding staircases, to the margins of society and through dark doors to spaces that have traditionally been kept hidden. Jennifer Uglow writes that many women writers of fiction have been drawn to ‘...those shifting realms where a

breath of the fantastic dislocates everyday life.’¹⁹¹ Uglow argues that histories of the ‘great tradition’ of supernatural writing, which include authors such as Walpole, Poe and M.R. James, often leave out women authors, whom she describes as: ‘rivals of these masters, invisible and silent.’¹⁹² Yet the women have been just as prolific for as long as the men. She observes:

Ghost stories, however, often turn out to be more than games, and burying myself enjoyably in these ghoulish tales, I am haunted (in more ways than one) by the way in which the wraiths seem to emanate from the women’s lives, from their longings, their anger, their fears and their struggles. Women bring to their writing the qualities of their particular experience, their history of living on the margins.¹⁹³

The night-shrieks in the dark castle of Millbank are born out of women’s longings, anger and struggles. Many of the women are in the prison because they have had to live their lives in the margins – they have had no choice.

Mark Wormald points out the novel’s self-conscious use of gothic literary references, such as Keats’ Eve of St. Agnes or the name Peter Quick which is reminiscent of Henry James’s ghost in The Turn of the Screw, Peter Quint.¹⁹⁴ Margaret chooses St. Agnes Eve for Selina, to come to her, with the aid of the spirits, so that they can escape together like the lovers in Keats’s gothic poem. The night, when young virgins are supposed to see visions of their future lovers, is freezing and the wind is ‘moaning at the chimney’ (313). Margaret waits in

¹⁹¹ Jenny Uglow, “Introduction” The Virago Book of Ghost Stories ed. Richard Dalby (London: Virago, 1988) x.

¹⁹² Jenny Uglow, “Introduction” The Virago Book of Ghost Stories ed. Richard Dalby (London: Virago, 1988) ix.

¹⁹³ Jenny Uglow, “Introduction” The Virago Book of Ghost Stories ed. Richard Dalby (London: Virago, 1988) ix.

¹⁹⁴ Mark Wormald: ‘Prior Knowledge: Sarah Waters and the Victorians’ British Fiction Today ed. Rod Mengham & Philip Tew (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2006) 195.

vain. When she finally learns that Selina has manipulated her in order to escape with the servant, Vigers, Margaret reacts in the manner of a woman who has ‘broken out’ at Millbank. Breaking out is a reaction to their confinement that takes hold of the women sometimes, ‘sending them smashing up their cells in fury’ (177) and shredding their blankets with their mouths. It is, says one of the matrons, ‘quite peculiar to female gaols’, adding that women have ‘an instinct for it’. (177) She appears to be suggesting that their actions are a product of their gender. It is far more likely that the women’s frustrations are borne out of their often undeserved incarceration by a patriarchal society.

Distraught, Margaret goes into Vigers’ room which she notices has much in common with the cell that Selina has inhabited. It contains nothing but a worn rug, a bowl, a jug and a bed. This tiny space is an example of the lack of liberty experienced by servants at this time. It is here that Margaret, ‘breaks out’ in an almost exact parallel of the scenes in the gaol:

I seized the mattress, and then the bed: the sheets I ripped. The tearing cotton – how can I write it? – it was like a drug upon me. I tore and tore, until the sheets were rags, until my hands were sore; and then I put the seams to my own mouth and tore with my teeth.’ (342)

Selina offered her the possibility of escape to a world that would not judge her because of her sexuality or gender, a world that would not see her as ‘unnatural’ because she was without a husband. It seems it was a promise without form, created by an illusionist. There is only one character who seems able to escape boundaries and that is Ruth, the maid who, according to Armitt and Gamble, is ‘the most subversive character of the text, not least because, unlike either Margaret or Selina, she has license to ‘roam’ across class demarcations and spatial

boundaries alike.¹⁹⁵ Like the invisible spinster, the lower-class maid is taken for granted in the middle-class Victorian world.

The final image in the novel is of Margaret as a woman in Millbank prison:

No food comes now, and my clumsy fire smokes and spits, and falls to ashes. My slop-pot sits unemptied, turning the dark air sour. (349)

Affinity highlights the way in which women's history has been silenced. Margaret is as much a prisoner in her middle class life as the women are prisoners of Millbank. The novel contests the rigid gender structures that operate in society in the 19th century, and highlights the importance of valuing personal history as well as the official. It is a cry for women's voices to be heard.

¹⁹⁵ Lucie Armitt & Sarah Gamble, "The haunted geometries of Sarah Water's Affinity" Textual Practice (20.1 2006) 152.

Fingersmith

Sue Trinder presents her own history from the opening lines of the novel. She is probably the most streetwise of Waters' characters, boldly holding the gaze of any stranger. When she buys a veil from a street seller, he teases her, telling her to get a hat as her face is too pretty to hide. She holds out her hand for the change and retorts: 'So's my arse.' (470)

When Sue is narrating, her direct and forthright address often sounds like the transcript of an oral history, demanding a response from the listener, asking 'Do you follow?' (14) or adding asides such as: 'You are waiting for me to start my story.' (14)

The London of Fingersmith is the domain of the small time criminal - a closed society with its own language and rules. Sue is brought up as a fingersmith in The Borough in a shop owned by Mr. Ibbs, a man who neatly fits Mayhew's description of the criminal 'private receiver'. Her surrogate mother is Mrs Sucksby, who runs a baby farm above the shop. Sue is well aware of the codes and language of the streets, expert at negotiating her section of the city, keeping to the underside, the alternative routes. In The Victorian Underworld, Donald Thomas refers to criminals as in a 'class' of their own, resisting traditional categorization:

'It was in June 1832 that *Fraser's Magazine* first warned its readers of the existence of a new and well-organized criminal class whose leaders acted as patrons of crime, arranging the disposal of stolen goods, and even regulating the admission of new members to the fraternity as if they had been nominating apprentices to an honourable craft..... Carried away by its belief in this distinct sub-class of society, the magazine

described its members as of a criminal ‘club’, something to be known more commonly as an underworld.¹⁹⁶

At the opening of the novel, Sue describes the unmappable streets of The Borough. Things that come into Mr. Ibbs’s shop by the front, generally leave by the back way. It is significant that ‘there was no street there’ (10) and, as Maud observes later with dismay, there were no maps. It is as if the area is not officially sanctioned. ‘You might find yourself baffled’ (10), Sue comments, unless you know where to look. Sue knows the route. She can describe the winding alleys and railway viaducts, though she is reluctant to identify quite which archway and dark lane leads directly to the river.

Down by the Thames they know two or three men who keep boats, in fact: ‘All along that crooked way, indeed, lived pals of ours – Mr Ibbs’ nephews, say, that I called cousins. We could send poke from our kitchen, through any of them to all the parts of London.’ (10) This image presents Ibbs’s shady premises as the centre of the city, like some key London railway terminus with tracks spidering out all around it. Sue’s centre of London is not the official one of Buckingham Palace, The Mall or Westminster, but an unofficial site which transgresses the officially sanctioned centres of the city.

In his study of London’s labourers and paupers, first published in serial form between 1851 and 1852, Henry Mayhew describes the operations of premises such as those of Mr Ibbs:

When *plate* is stolen, it is sometimes carried way on the night of the robbery in a cab, or other conveyance, to the house of the burglars. Some thieves take it to a low beershop.....others to persons living in private houses, pretending possibly to be

¹⁹⁶ Donald Thomas, The Victorian Underworld (London: Murray, 1998) 4.

bootmakers, copper-plate printers, tailors, marine store-dealers etc.. Such parties are private receivers well-known to the burglars. The doors of their houses are opened at any time of the night.¹⁹⁷

The secrets are known to the streetwise few. Ibbs' shop is on the wrong side of the tracks and the law so codes are needed. A series of signals and signs operate in order for 'poke' to travel across London 'at speeds that would astonish you.'(10) The area is threatening because it cannot be officially mapped or controlled. For Sue, the Borough is protective, for with her inside knowledge, she can move anonymously through these liminal spaces of the city. She knows that anonymity can bring freedom and familiarity. She can evade the control of the law.

Sue's part of the city is full of shadows, but: twilight is a 'false' light, says Sue, and good for 'shady' business(10). This in-between state is a metaphor for Sue's life. Even when she is in bed in Lant Street, it is 'never quite dark there, and never quite still.'(6) At the shop, they are all 'more or less thieves.'(7) They resist neat categorization. For thieves, night is day. Gentleman says he trusts Sue because '...she's a good girl – which is to say, a bad girl..' (27)

This ambiguity extends to the two girls at the centre of the novel. They are neither rich nor poor, neither completely lady nor thief. Sexually, they are 'transgressive' and within a Victorian society, they challenge traditional gender boundaries. It is also unclear as to which class they belong. Maud Lilly, the 'lady' is in fact the daughter of the house of fingersmiths,

¹⁹⁷ Henry Mayhew, London Labour and the London Poor 1851-2 (Penguin: London, 1985) 496.

while the streetwise Sue is really an heiress. Class boundaries are blurred when they discover they have been living each other's lives.

Nick Rennison observes that the opening of Fingersmith introduces two key influences in the novel – Victorian melodrama and Dickens. He comments: 'The novel contains many of the elements of melodrama – the moustache-twirling villain, the innocent orphan and the wicked uncle, the dark shadows of the madhouse and the workhouse – but it uses them for its own more subtle purposes.'¹⁹⁸

The city is the natural home of the 'underworld' that Donald Thomas describes. It is a transient place and when Maud is there, she describes the Lant Street shop as a 'short-memored house' in a 'short- memored district.' (363) She wakes often in the night to hear the sound of footsteps, or the creak of wheels. Anonymity and movement is easy in the city. Maud finds the city unsettling, despite having craved it. What she has longed for, however, is a romanticised image of London, based on stories of its official sites and traditions.

In The Borough, at the back of Mr. Ibbs's shop is 'a little covered passage and a small dark court', (10) where outsiders will be quickly disoriented. The seasoned London fingersmith, however, will easily be able to navigate the unmapped route through '...another, darker lane, that would take you, very quick and inconspicuous, to the river.' (10)

¹⁹⁸ Nick Rennison, Contemporary British Novelists (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005) 181.

Sue knows the London streets. She is at home upon them and confident enough to negotiate those byways less familiar to her than the Borough's lanes, as she describes: 'From Hammersmith, we walked. That part of London was strange to me, but I found I knew my way all right...' (469)

Sue is reluctant to leave her familiar London to masquerade as a lady's maid in Marlow, even if she believes she will end up three thousand pounds better off. The Borough, with its dodgers and thieves, represents safety to Sue. The countryside, on the other hand, seems hostile and unsafe. She remembers her first trip outside the Borough, to Bromley: 'I had come home with hives.' (29) The countryside is 'quiet and queer and the people 'simpletons' She also fears that the girl she is going to serve might be mad. 'She might try to throttle me; and there would be no-one about, for miles and miles, to hear me calling.' (30)

Even when she goes in disguise to Briar, she is still 'of' the city. The railway porter criticises her for bringing down her 'London tongue' and all the time it is the images and memories of the city that enable her to get through her imprisonment at Briar. Her love of London is shown in the way she personifies its buildings, as when she hears the rain outside in the night: 'I thought of the Borough. Rain makes London houses groan. I wondered if Mrs. Sucksby was lying in bed, while the damp house groaned about her, thinking of me.' (121) Buildings in London like the city itself, have a personality.

On arrival, Sue's reaction of horror is similar to that of Maud when she reaches London for the first time. Sue finds the countryside as dreadful as she feared. It lacks any colour, excitement or edge. Everything seems clean, washed, pure and clear, so much so that it

makes her bilious.(121) The fog is an insipid 'grey', instead of the visceral 'brown'(54)city smog. The bells of Marlow are 'mournful' while London's are 'cheerful'(56) and bedtime is 10 pm. Sue observes: 'We laughed at people who went to bed before midnight, at home.'(60)

Restrictions are far more apparent in the life of the middle-class 'lady', Maud Rivers, than in the criminal world in which Sue Trinder is brought up. Maud is incarcerated at Briar, never leaving its grounds, and knows nothing of the world outside. In her Lant Street life Sue feels free, despite the fact that Mrs. Sucksby is always keeping a close eye on her. Maud's upbringing is cold and sterile, while Sue is part of a loving family. She can roam The Borough safely because her knowledge of the streets gives her power and because she is part of an underworld community which looks after its own. Sue first experiences a loss of this freedom on her arrival in the country, complaining: 'I might as well have been put in gaol, I thought. A gaol would have been livelier. Here, there was only an awful silence: you listened and it troubled your ears.' (61)

It is the London of crooked streets and twilight alleys that Sue feels so homesick for. Briar House offers little private space for her or any of the servants. There is nowhere to hide and few dark corners in which she can become invisible. Briar presents a strong contrast with the Lant Street house, which regularly finds spaces in its attics for contacts who need to disappear from the public gaze for a while.

Sue misses the clamour of the crowds in the city, looking out at the view of the grounds which are '...just plain grass and trees. A few black birds pulled worms from the lawn. I

wondered which way London was.’(71) However, the key difference between Briar and The Borough is summed up in her comment: ‘...country roads aren’t like city ones. There are only about four of them, and they all go to the same place in the end.’ (55) The contrast here is with the potential of the late nineteenth century London, as described by Peter Ackroyd:

The city itself is a form of promiscuous desire, with its endless display of other streets and other people affording the opportunity of a thousand encounters and a thousand departures. The very strangeness of London, its multifarious areas remaining unknown even to its inhabitants, includes the possibility of chance and sudden meetings.¹⁹⁹

The possibilities and polyphony of London are absent at Briar and it is the crowds and the ‘chance and sudden meetings’ that Sue misses. The image of a bright, clean city of opportunities is the mythical view of London held by many of the country folk that Sue works with, although they are also a little in awe and afraid of it. One of Sue’s colleagues comments: ‘But you, of course, will be used to the great styles of London.’ (67) Sue’s reply is heavy with irony and knowledge of the city: ‘I thought of Dainty’s hair, John’s dog-skin coat. “Pretty used,” I said.’(67)

When Sue describes London to Maud, she points out that it is both dark *and* light. Sue knows a different London to the ‘official’ West End of Maud’s imaginings, but Maud only wants to hear about the city’s beauty. Sue plays along with the dream when her mistress enquires:

‘Quite filled, you say, with people?’

‘Of course. But dark. Will you cut?’

‘Dark? Are you sure? I thought London was said to be bright. With great lamps fired – I believe – with gas?’

¹⁹⁹ Peter Ackroyd, London, The Biography (London: Chatto and Windus, 2000) 379.

‘Great lamps, like diamonds!’ I said. ‘In the theatres and halls. You may dance there, miss, right through the night...’ (94)

Maud believes the myth of fashionable London life and liberty offered by Gentleman and she speaks of it in a different sort of way; ‘...not in a gaping, country way, but in a noticing, hungryish manner – as if London was something to her, and she longed to hear of it.’ (67) Even at this early stage there are signs that Maud is not what she seems. Perhaps she longs for the city because she was born to it? But Briar is not purely ‘country’. It is a more ambiguous place, financed through her uncle’s links with the illicit book trade and its dealers such as Mr. Hawtreay and numerous city outlets such as his shop in London’s infamous Holywell Street.

From the moment she is able to write, Maud is put to work with her uncle’s collection of pornographic novels. Mr Lilly’s work is based on that of the Victorian, Henry Spencer Ashbee, who produced three great annotated bibliographies of pornography. Cora Kaplan observes that the novel highlights the question of reading pleasure, history, aesthetics – and sex on the page – in fictional Victoriana.²⁰⁰ Since she was very young, Maud has been working on these titles with her uncle, but Mr Lilly has never thought to question whether this is a positive activity for a young, innocent child. This is because he is far less concerned with the content of his books than with their bindings or the specific fonts they are printed in. Like Margaret Prior’s father in *Affinity*, he symbolises a very Victorian view of the world in which everything can be classified and neatly fitted into a particular category where it must remain.

²⁰⁰ Cora Kaplan, *Victoriana: histories, fictions, criticisms* (Edinburgh: Cromwell Press, 2007) 113.

Though she is taught to read and write, Maud's education is far more limited than that of Sue, who is brought up in a thieves' kitchen in the centre of the Borough lanes. Maud is taught to 'recite softly' (195), but never to sing. Sue learns to use her voice in its full force from childhood. She is taken to the theatre, albeit for begging, and would have been constantly exposed to song and dance in the city. Maud, however, is schooled in the use of inks and styles of fonts for printing, such as 'Egyptian, pica, brevier, emerald, ruby, pearl...' (195) None of them glitter or shine, though, as Maud observes: 'They are named for jewels. It is a cheat. For they are hard and dull as cinders in a grate' (195) She doesn't see the potential in the printing process until she meets Sue.

Sue, however, growing up in The Borough, learns her alphabet and to recognise her name from picking the letters from stolen embroidered handkerchiefs. She also knows how to add and subtract through handling stolen coins, along with a host of other 'life' skills:

Good coins we kept, of course. Bad ones come up too bright, and must be slummed, with blacking and grease, before you pass them on. I learned that, too. Silks and linens there are ways of washing and pressing, to make them seem new. Gems I would shine, with ordinary vinegar.' (10)

Maud is well versed in the contents of the 'rare' books her uncle keeps, though she learnt early that their words and pictures lied. While watching Barbara, she noticed:

Her legs – that I knew from my uncle's books should be smooth – are dark with hair; the place between them – which I know should be neat, and fair – darkest of all...

...I understand my uncle's books to be filled with falsehoods, and I despise myself for having supposed them truths. (201)

Yet it takes the fingersmith from The Borough to enable Maud to explore her sexuality. 'I knew how to do it alright, for Dainty had shown me, once' says Sue. (141) She shows Maud the difference between her uncle's dry catalogues of pornography and the surprising moistness of her first experience of sex. Maud is amazed that: 'I feel it as a falling, a dropping, a trickling, like sand from a bulb of glass. Then I move; and I am not dry, like sand. I am wet. I am running, like water, like ink.' (282) Maud has been surrounded by sexual acts on paper, but has had no experience of the reality of a sexual encounter. The ink is dry in the books she has read for her uncle, but Maud's imagery of wet ink here suggests the potential of writing a different story, one of love between two women.

For Maud, loving Sue is like the discovery of something new and raw: '*Everything*, I say to myself, *is changed*. I think I was dead before. Now she has touched the life of me, the quick of me; she has put back my flesh and opened me up. *Everything is changed*.' (283)

As her love for Maud grows, Sue is increasingly unwilling to carry out Gentleman's plan which, she believes, is for him to marry Maud then have her put in an asylum. Sue is unaware that it is she who will be tricked into the madhouse by Maud and Gentleman. For as much as she wants Sue, Maud also desires her freedom and sees the city as the only means of escape from her imprisonment at Briar.

Sue thought she was trapped at Briar, but when she arrives at the asylum she begins to understand the true meaning of incarceration. She is believed to be the middle-class 'Mrs Rivers'. As a married woman at this time, her husband had the power to put her in an asylum if he thought fit. Many of the women in the madhouse are abandoned there by their families.

The incarceration of the women creates a parallel with the experiences of the prisoners at Millbank in Affinity. But while Millbank is filled with predominantly working class women, the asylum operates as a metaphor for the constraints placed on middle class women in the 1860s. Sue is surrounded by many women who would have been considered 'ladies' in the outside world. Miss Wilson, who shares her ward, tells Sue that her brother pays 'a guinea a week' (426) for her to stay there. Also in Sue's ward is Betty, a 'simpleton', who the nurses make fun of, using her as a servant to do their chores, even though she is 'the daughter of a very grand family.' (409) It seems that this is what grand families do with their daughters if they don't conform to their expectations.

Many of the women have been placed in the asylum by their husbands, or male family members. When Sue tells Nurse Spiller that she can't make her stay there, the nurse replies: 'I think we know the law. Your order's been signed, ain't it?' (409) As long as a woman has been signed in by her husband, she is bound to stay. Sue tells the nurses that eventually Dr Christie will believe her story. Miss Wilson informs Sue that even if the doctors do believe that she is not mad it will make no difference for: '...it is your husband who must sign you out.' (426) Judith Walkowitz describes the powerlessness of women in this situation in the nineteenth century:

Marriage no longer resolved the female dilemma; it compounded it. The insane asylum simply amplified the danger of the domestic asylum; it was a supplementary patriarchal structure, a place of madness and sexuality where doctors substituted for tyrannical husbands as the keepers and tormenters of women.²⁰¹

In the same ward as Sue is Mrs. Price, whose husband regularly has her admitted every year then allows her home, when she has been suitably subdued. Miss Wilson is kept in the

²⁰¹ Judith R. Walkowitz, City of Dreadful Delight (London: Virago 1992) 182.

madhouse by her brother. (426) Men are regularly incarcerating women when they become troublesome, an action that is perfectly acceptable in this society.

Sue, however, responds vociferously at the injustice of being taken into the 'hospital' and, as the doctor grabs hold of her, she struggles and screams at Gentleman: 'You bloody swine!' (174) and 'You fuckster!' (174) She tries to tell the doctor she is not who he thinks she is, but he bows to her 'husband's' authority. When Sue is simply trying to tell the truth, the doctors describe her at different points as 'demented' (396), 'in a convulsion' (396) and suffering from a 'delusion'. (423)

Sue has found the silence of the countryside unsettling after the clamour of the Borough Streets; now she finds the attempts to silence *her* quite unbelievable. When Sue shrieks and shouts as Maud's carriage disappears into the distance, the doctors decide she is becoming demented and push what looks like a flat, wooden spoon into her mouth:

He came to my side and held my head, and put the spoon to my mouth, between my teeth. It was smooth, but he pushed it hard and it hurt me. I thought I should be choked: I bit it, to keep it from going down my throat. It tasted bad. I still think of all the other people's mouths it must have gone in, before mine.' (396-7)

A spirited young woman such as Sue will not be tolerated and she is shown how the women at the asylum are silenced.

The silencing of women's tongues is reminiscent of the treatment they receive in Affinity's Millbank Prison. There the women are unable to speak because they are kept in solitary confinement and become unused to using their voices. In the Millbank chain room there are

leather gags and hobbles for particularly difficult inmates. The asylum women are also regularly forced to wear a device that physically restricts their speech. The elderly Miss Wilson, who has been in the asylum for twenty-two years, regularly complains about the unwholesome food and the fetid air. Dr Christie regards this as merely more evidence of her madness and to stop her criticisms she is silenced. He asks her:

‘Your tongue, Miss Wilson! What do we keep upon it? Hmm?’

She worked her mouth; then said, after a minute:

‘A curb.’

‘That is right. A curb. Very good. Draw it tight. Nurse Spiller – ‘

He turned and called the nurse to him, and spoke to her quietly. Miss Wilson put her hands to her mouth, as if to feel for a chain; and again, she caught my eye, and her fingers fluttered, and she seemed ashamed.’ (412)

Like Margaret Prior, the women are also regularly drugged to keep them obedient and to silence any complaints.

Sarah Waters has described Fingersmith as an ‘homage to sensation fiction’²⁰² a popular form in Victorian England which often centred around transgressive women. Fingersmith borrows many of the motifs from this particular genre such as crime, madness and murder. Ironically, it is just such fiction that is seen by the doctors as being the cause of Sue’s incarceration. Dr Christie believes this is so: ‘You have been put too much to literary work,’ he said on one of

²⁰² Sarah Waters, Interview Radio 4 Bookclub (3 May 2007).
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/arts/bookclub/ram/bookclub_20040307.ram>

his visits, 'and that is the cause of your complaint.' (429) He believes that too much exposure to fiction can damage a young woman:

'*Fancies*, Mrs Rivers. If you might only hear yourself! Terrible plots? Laughing villains? Stolen fortunes and girls made out to be mad? The stuff of lurid fiction! We have a name for your disease. We call it a hyper-aesthetic one. You have been encouraged to over-indulge yourself in literature; and have inflamed your organs of fancy.' (421)

There is nothing fanciful in Sue's descriptions though. Her life has been just like a sensation fiction tale. She has never read sensation fiction because she *cannot* read.

At first Sue doesn't understand why she has been chosen to be the recipient of the nurses' cruel games. At night when Nurse Bacon and her colleagues have all been drinking, they jump on Sue to see who one can make her scream the loudest. They take their turns and finally, the huge Nurse Bacon leaps upon her 'and the shock and the weight of her was awful.' (442) Sue is in pain, but the nurse laughs and begins to move her hips:

She moved them in a certain way. My eyes flew open. She gave me a leer. 'Like it, do you?' she said, still moving. 'No? We heard you did.' And at that, the nurses roared. They roared, and I saw on their faces as they gazed at me that nasty look I had seen before but never understood. I understood it now, of course; and all at once I guessed what Maud must have said to Dr Christie, that time at Mrs Cream's. The thought that she had said it – that she had said it, before gentleman, as a way of making me out to be mad – struck me like a blow to the heart.' (442)

The nurses have got to hear about Sue's sexuality and are using it as a weapon against her. Maud and Richard have suggested it as a reason for her incarceration, to imply that she is unfit to be at large in society. Maud's betrayal causes Sue far more pain than anything the nurses can do to her.

The doctor diagnoses that Sue is in a paroxysm, and prescribes a thirty minute cold plunge during which she is fixed to a wooden frame, winched up then plunged in and out of icy water. Sue fears they have killed her and passes out. Her punishment is reminiscent of that meted out to witches on the ducking-stool and, like those women, she is certainly viewed as ‘unnatural’. After this treatment she is broken and bruised and feels she will never be quite her self again. The full extent of her despair is shown when, as she tries to make herself think of Mr Ibbs’s shop in Lant Street, she is unable to picture it:

When I tried to go over the streets of The Borough in my mind, I found I had lost my way. No-one else in that house knew those streets. If the ladies spoke of London ever, they spoke of a place they remembered from when they were girls, in Society – a place so different from the city I knew, it might as well have been Bombay.’ (445)

The fact that she cannot picture her beloved London shows just how low she has sunk. Sue never loses her way in the streets of The Borough, but now she fears she will never be able to go back there and instead be condemned to picture London as a place she does not know.

When Sue first arrives in the madhouse, one of the ladies asks her where she is from and, when she learns it is London, says: ‘And the season just beginning. That is very hard for you. And so young! Are you out?’ (418) Sue doesn’t know what she is talking about and, when the woman comments that the trees in Kensington must now be in leaf, Sue replies: ‘I don’t know. I don’t know. I never saw them.’ (419) The two women are referring to very different Londons. Sue has rarely strayed out of her part of the city and is unfamiliar with privileged areas such as Kensington. It is the official London that the woman refers to. Sue knows only the unofficial.

When the possibility of escape arrives in the form of young Charles, it is the skills she has learnt at Lant Street that enable Sue to copy a key and it is the thought of The Borough that gives her a purpose at this time: ‘Mrs Sucksby was also waiting – perhaps, was sighing in her bed – or walking, wringing her hands and calling out my name...It must have been the thought of that, that gave me courage and made the file run true.’ (46)

The city is certainly in Sue’s blood. This is evident at her lowest point, when she has been institutionalised and stripped of her rights. Through the nights of relentlessly filing a key to secure her release, it is the thought of Mrs. Sucksby waiting in the Borough that keeps Sue focussed. (460) The controlled space of the madhouse illuminates the polyphonic possibilities of London.

Sue knows she is nearing the city after her escape, when the roads grow wider and the chimneys taller. She can’t sleep – she just watches the road. Yet, for all her romanticising about London, she is still aware of its ambiguities:

The chimneys grew taller, the roads and rivers wider, the threads of smoke more thick, the farther off the country spread; until at last, at the farthest point of all, they made a smudge, a stain, a darkness – a darkness, like the darkness of the coal in a fire – a darkness that was broken, here and there, where the sun caught panes of glass and golden tips of domes and steeples, with glittering points of light.
‘London,’ I said. ‘Oh, London!’ (467)

London is dirty. But it is the darkness of coal in a fire – when burned it creates light and warmth. This is the central metaphor for the city; both heaven and hell; the fire and the golden steeple. The conflict brings about the possibility of change.

Maud's arrival in the city dispels her golden dreams of London. She has been trapped at Briar since she was a small child, and is desperate to find the city that she believes will offer freedom. But the London that she thought would be bright is grey, stinking and hostile.

Imprisoned in the Lant Street house, she feels about London as Sue does about the countryside. What Sue loves about the city, Maud finds threatening. The city as both Heaven and Hell is a recurrent trope in Both Fingersmith and Tipping the Velvet and Maud's description of the London morning creates a horrific scene:

The light turns filthy pink. The pink gives way, in time, to a sickly yellow. It creeps, and with it creeps sound-softly at first, the rising in a staggering crescendo: crowing cocks, whistles and bells, dogs, shrieking babies, violent calling, coughing, spitting, the tramp of feet, the endless hollow beating of hooves and the grinding of wheels. Up, up it comes, out of the throat of London. (347)

The image of queasiness with the light a 'sickly' yellow gradually develops until the crescendo of noise is vomited up from the city. The imagery of a diseased city is developed when Mrs Sucksby tells Maud not to stand looking out of the window at night:

'Come away from there, sweetheart,' Mrs Sucksby will murmur if she wakes. They say there is cholera in the Borough. 'Who knows but you won't take a fever from the draught?' (366)

There is an ambiguity in the representation of the world outside. On the one hand it offers freedom; on the other it carries the threat of corruption.

When she can no longer stand the claustrophobia of Mrs Sucksby's kitchen, Maud looks to Mr. Hawtrey, the book dealer in Holywell Street, for her escape. The street is an example of a

marginal site where Maud feels both alienated and curiously at home. On escaping from Lant Street she tries to negotiate the Borough streets and is immediately lost:

There's a dusty path – it was slick with mud when I came down it before; but I see it, and know it – I know it!- it leads to an alley and this, in turn, leads to another path, which crosses a street and leads me-where? To a road I do not recognise, that runs under the arches of a bridge. I recall the bridge, but remember it nearer, lower. I recall a high, dead wall. There is no wall here. (369)

The paths of The Borough are a criss-crossing maze which the uninitiated cannot negotiate.

As she runs through the squalid city, Maud sees mudlarks at the side of the Thames – an image that fills her with horror.

She runs through roads she barely recognises, bewailing the lack of any map, constantly becoming embroiled in the warren of streets. Her reaction to the traffic is similar to that of Nan King, on first encountering the London roads: 'So I whip myself along. Only the traffic checks me, the rushing horses and wheels: at every crossing I pause, then cast myself into the mass of cabs and wagons;' (370) She gazes at the Thames which 'flows like poison' and remembers the innocent river flowing at Briar. (370)

Wearing her bright gown that Mrs Sucksby bought her, Maud becomes the object of the gaze of strangers as she desperately tries to find her way through the meandering alleys:

...the streets I am walking now are narrow, unpaved, still reeking of dirty water. There are men upon them, too – men of the boats and warehouses, who, like the others, try to catch my eye, whistle and sometimes call; though they do not touch me. I put my hand before my face, and go on faster. (371)

She covers her face in a futile attempt at anonymity and the silken slippers from Mrs Sucksby are worn right through for such delicate footwear is not appropriate for walking in the city. A

man tries to force her into a coach and when she resists calls her ‘You damn little teaser.’ (374).

By the time she reaches Holywell Street, however, she has begun to learn that half-light can protect her. She starts to feel safer and observes: ‘The London day is still hot, still bright; in turning into Holywell Street, however, I seem to step into twilight. But the twilight is good, after all: it hides my face, and robs my gown of its colours.’ (375)

Maud is familiar with the erotic texts on sale. She has, after all, been part of the trade. Instead of an absence in the city, here she is, albeit shoeless and bedraggled, within the discourse of the city. She sees publications she recognises and exclaims: ‘I stop, and watch as a man picks idly through a box of coverless volumes and takes one up. *The Mousetrap of Love*. – I know it, I have read that title so many times to my uncle I know it almost by heart!’ (375)

Lynda Nead writes of the importance of this street of ‘obscene’ publications. It can be viewed ‘...as a micro-history of mid-Victorian London, Holywell Street suggests that the city and its public were heterogeneous and resisted clear categorization, the need for which was so clearly and consistently articulated elsewhere in Victorian cultural ideology.’²⁰³ She also points out that women were present in Holywell Street both as consumers and as producers of obscene publications.

²⁰³ Lynda Nead, “Mapping the Self: Gender, Space and Modernity in Mid-Victorian London” Rewriting the Self ed. Roy Porter (London: Routledge, 1997) 185.

Nead points out that: ‘By the middle of the nineteenth century, Holywell Street had accumulated an incredible degree of symbolic meaning’.²⁰⁴ The twilight lane, that Maud describes as: ‘...so narrow, so crooked, so dark...’ (375) sat in the middle of a route that linked Westminster and the Houses of Parliament with the Old Bailey’s criminal courts in the City. Laws were made at Westminster and enacted at the Old Bailey and, Nead observes: ‘Holywell Street’s transgressive space threatened to interfere with the symbolic route of law.’²⁰⁵

In 1857, the first Obscene Publications Act in was passed in an attempt to prevent obscene material from being circulated. This would have been the type of books and pictures that Maud had worked on with her uncle at Briar. At the end of the novel, Waters notes that all of the pornographic texts cited by Maud, such as memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure and The Lustful Turk, were real publications in the nineteenth century. The Act gave police new powers to seize materials and destroy them. Mr Hawtreys is particularly worried when he sees the dishevelled girl arrive at his shop and cries: ‘Suppose a policeman should have seen you, and followed you here? Do you know what would happen to me – to my staff, to my stock – if the police were to come down heavily upon us?’ (380) Lynda Nead observes that the publications were seen as dangerous, due to the fact that they were on display and therefore could be seen by passers-by:

The significance of obscene publications legislation within the context of mid-nineteenth-century urbanisation was that it focused on the problem of ‘seeing’. It responded to a specific form of viewing/looking, made possible by mass cultural

²⁰⁴ Frank Mort & Lynda Nead, “Sexual Geographies” New Formations 37 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1999) 39.

²⁰⁵ Frank Mort & Lynda Nead, “Sexual Geographies” New Formations 37 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1999) 40.

production and the spaces of the modern city: where the display of visual commodities enabled their consumption, merely by movement through the space of the street. (41)

Maud, too, is being reduced to a commodity because she is defined by her bright gown, which would be taken at the time as a signal that she wanted to be seen and was therefore available. Hawtrey is frightened that she might have been observed coming into the shop and when she tells him of the man who tried to take her into his coach, he replies: ‘Oh, only look at yourself! Do you know how you will have seemed, upon the streets?’ (380)

When Sue finally discovers Maud again after having lost her for so long, It is Maud who is making a living from writing erotic stories, which will presumably end up in Holywell Street. Sue asks:

‘ “Is there money in it?”

She blushed. “A little,” she said. “Enough, if I write swiftly.”

“And you – You like it?”

She blushed still harder. “I find I am good at it...” She bit her lip.’(547)

With her connections to the city through the book trade, the writing of ‘pornography’ comes easily to Maud. Of course, she is a city girl at heart – Mrs. Sucksby’s own.

Maud shows Sue an example of the sort of books that she was reading and cataloguing for her uncle from a very young age. Maud reads an extract to Sue, in a flat voice:

Quickly my daring hand seized her most secret treasure, regardless of her soft complaints, which my burning kisses reduced to mere murmurs, while my fingers penetrated into the covered way of love...(545)

This and many similar extracts, speak of men's oppression of women: descriptions of rape presented as entertainment. Sue looks at the pictures in the books on the shelves:

One was of two bare girls. I looked at Maud, and my heart seemed to shrink.

'You knew it all,' I said. That's the first thing I thought. 'You said that you knew nothing, when all the time - '

'I did know nothing,' she said. (545)

The dual narrators give a sense that the two women have written their own story between them, with two distinct narrative voices, reversing hermeneutic expectations. Sue's sections, in the past tense, seem more knowing than Maud's, with a more ironic, humorous and sharp style, apparent in her descriptions of the countryside: 'It was colder here than at home. It was colder and darker and the air smelt queer and the people – didn't I say it – the people were howling simpletons.' (54)

Written in the present tense, Maud's style is more immediate and breathless. Typical of this is the language she uses when reflecting on the plot to escape to London with Richard. Her imagery is sensational and emotional:

After that, I feel the mounting pressure of our plot as I think men must feel the straining of checked machinery, tethered beasts, the gathering of tropical storms. I wake each day and think: Today I will do it. Today I will draw free the bolt and let the engine race, unleash the beast, punctuate the lowering clouds! Today, I will let him claim me - !
(270)

Maud seems less in control. This could be due to her relative innocence compared to Sue, or it might also be a reflection of the style of books she is used to reading, and writing.

Significantly, the novel ends with Maud further empowering Sue by teaching her to read, and presumably, to write too. When Sue asks what Maud's paper says. She replies: 'It is filled with all the words for how I want you...Look.' (547) The women will write together. They will collaborate on their own story. The history of the dispossessed, the marginal groups – a polyphony of voices reaching up out of the mouth of the city.

The final image is of the women creating a space for fiction about lesbian sexuality in a Victorian, patriarchal world. Their stories will challenge the texts created by men, texts which belittle and objectify women. Their writing will contest traditional gender assumptions and write lesbian history back into the story.

CHAPTER TWO: NEIL BARTLETT part 1

Who Was That Man?

Mr Clive & Mr Page

Who Was That Man?

Mr Clive and Mr Page

‘Every passion borders on the chaotic, but the collector’s passion borders on the chaos of memories.’

Walter Benjamin.²⁰⁶

Who Was That Man? and Mr Clive and Mr Page consider the way that the gay history of the city is collected and assembled. The first novel offers the forms of collage, scrapbooks and diaries as a model. The second presents the reader with just such a diary, filled with fragments and traces of articles, letters and newspaper cuttings - the secret diary of a gay bank clerk in 1950s London.

²⁰⁶ Walter Benjamin, Illuminations, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Cape, 1970) 60.

Who Was That Man?

Who Was That Man? is subtitled 'A Present for Mr. Oscar Wilde'. The plates on the first and last pages show flowers on Oscar's grave at Père Lachaise Cemetery. A closer look reveals recent graffiti etched into the gravestone: names of lovers, initials. The monument is surrounded by notes and messages to this day and flowers are still regularly placed there. Underneath the image at the end of the book, a caption reads: 'God Save the Queen'. Wilde is *the Queen* - a metaphor for gay history; an iconic figure through which to celebrate London's gay past and present.

The question 'Who was that man?' does not just refer to Oscar, however. According to the Narrator, it is a question that should be asked about any gay man whose history may otherwise be lost. Who Was That Man? is dedicated to Bartlett's gay heroes, men who have always been on the edge of history: Private Flower, a soldier arrested in 1830s Westminster for cottaging with an MP; a Victorian rent boy, Jack Saul and Fanny and Stella, two men tried for cross-dressing in 1871. *They* are centre stage in Bartlett's work and, as Mark Turner observes: 'he asks us to see them as central to a different kind of narrative, and in so doing to understand London in the 1890s, but also in the 1980s, anew.'²⁰⁷

²⁰⁷ Mark Turner, Backward Glances (London: Reaktion, 2003) 47.

Who Was That Man subverts traditional historical biography, challenging conventional histories through its form and style and offering voices from the past within the present, validating the experience of the marginalized.

Jeanette Winterson's description of history as 'a collection of found objects washed up through time'²⁰⁸ is particularly relevant to Bartlett's work. Bartlett's novels present history as collage – snippets of letters, articles and poems; bulging scrapbooks which, when opened, scatter so many photos, cuttings and scrawled notes. Bartlett foregrounds these personal documents giving importance to stories that have often been sidelined by 'official' historical records. He offers the reader 'secret' diaries containing the stories of shopboys, servants and disco queens. These are the voices from gay culture that are silenced, missing from history. They are coded, but only understandable to readers who have the key.

'Gay London' writes Bartlett, is 'necessarily as much fiction as fact.'²⁰⁹ The city's gay history is an unofficial one, therefore written through myth, legend, heroic figures and stories.

The Normal Heart, Larry Kramer's 1985 play about the AIDS crisis in America documents how the government and the media attempted to silence the voices of gay men. In an angry speech at the end, his protagonist, Ned, calls up a long list of gay heroes to fight back against invisibility:

²⁰⁸ Jeanette Winterson, The Power Book (London: Jonathan Cape, 2000) 242.

²⁰⁹ Nick Rennison, ed. Waterstone's Guide to London Writing (London: Waterstone's, 1999) 155.

Ned: I belong to a culture that includes Proust, Henry James, Tchaikovsky, Cole Porter, Plato, Socrates, Aristotle, Alexander the Great, Michaelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, Christopher Marlowe, Walt Whitman, Herman Melville, Tennessee Williams, Byron, E.M. Forster, Lorca, Auden, Francis Bacon, James Baldwin, Harry Stack Sullivan, John Maynard Keynes, Dag Hammarskjöld... These are not invisible men...

...It's all there – all through history we've been there;²¹⁰

The voicing of the list emphasises a pride in gay history, particularly important in the mid 1980s, when the gay community was being castigated in the media in the wake of AIDS.

Laura Gowing describes 'shifts in historical paradigms.' one of which she describes as '...the movement towards a new "history from below" that restores historical agency to those whose voices have traditionally been suppressed.'²¹¹ While using Oscar as a central figure, Bartlett also argues for a history told from 'below'. He does not want only privileged gay voices to be foregrounded. The stories of the telegraph workers are as important as those of the MPs. He points out: 'Again and again it is only the contributions of the privileged to the formation of our lives, and the mythology of those lives, that are recorded.' (59)

In his recent Gay History of Britain, Matt Cook points out that the 1980s move to record the lives of gay men and lesbians placed oral history alongside an increasing body of gay art, journalism and literature and 'With varying source material, different kinds of history necessarily emerge.'²¹² Part of this move was the establishment of the Hall Carpenter

²¹⁰ Larry Kramer, The Normal Heart (New York: Plume, 1985) 114.

²¹¹ Laura Gowing, "History" Lesbian and Gay Studies, A Critical Introduction Andy Medhurst and Sally Munt ed. (London: Cassell, 1997) 53.

²¹² Matt Cook, A Gay History of Britain (Oxford: Greenwood World, 2007) xiii.

Archives in 1982, which began a collection of press clippings, periodicals, books and published materials from gay and lesbian groups. Funded by the GLC, an oral history project was set up in 1985. The project was to give voice to those who had been most marginalized in historical accounts up to that time. Margot Farnham writes that up until the time the interviews began, the sources of a lesbian and gay history had largely been the writings of ‘experts’ or ‘stars’.²¹³ (xi) In its introduction to Walking After Midnight, a collection of interviews from the archives, the group writes:

‘By recording the personal and political events which have shaped the lives of the majority of people whose experiences are not normally recorded by ‘official’ history, we become the active participants of our own history and can have more control over its interpretation.’²¹⁴

Bartlett’s Narrator is nameless for he could be any gay man recounting his personal story of the city. He speaks directly to the reader, as if he is being interviewed, assuming familiarity, telling his story in conversational tone, pausing to light a cigarette or to recall a particular moment or face. The start of Who Was That Man? is reminiscent of transcripts of interviews from the Archives:

Tell me your story from the very beginning, and how you got acquainted with him.

Well, first... you know I haven’t always lived in London. I moved here in the early summer of 1981, but I suppose I always assumed that I’d live here. (xix)

²¹³ The Hall Carpenter Archives, Gay Men’s Oral History Group, Walking After Midnight, Gay Men’s Life Stories (London: Routledge, 1989) xi.

²¹⁴ The Hall Carpenter Archives, Gay Men’s Oral History Group, Walking After Midnight, Gay Men’s Life Stories (London: Routledge, 1989) 1.

This is the story of a young man discovering the city. The use of a first person narrator creates a sense of intimacy. The unnamed man is taking the reader/listener into his confidence, trusting that they will empathise with him and assuming a common ground. It is evocative of transcripts from oral history projects, such as the Hall-Carpenter Archives, where, in 1985, John Alcock recorded his memories of arriving in London:

It was about this time [1944] that I went to London for the first time, for a weekend. I found myself in Leicester Square and it was fascinating for me to see young airforce men in uniform with make-up on! I went back to the hostel and told my boyfriend that I wanted to go to London and he said that he always knew that would happen, that once I saw London I'd never be able to keep away from it. So we packed up and went to London and stayed there until I went into the army.²¹⁵

Who Was That Man? begins with the words: 'I wrote this book in London in 1985 and 1986, and I suppose that's what it's about. I wanted to write a book about what it feels like...' (xix) Both speakers attach great significance to their arrival in the city, an important and recurring trope in Bartlett's work.

The stories of Bartlett's protagonists are woven around the city and tell of its secret locations and language, used sometimes out of necessity, to enable men to sidestep the law, and sometimes for fun. An example of this is the 'gay slang', Polari, a carnivalesque and subversive language which the Narrator describes as 'decorating' the city. (81) It is upon arrival in London that Bartlett's protagonists are able to start understanding the importance of their history and the way the city maps a gay identity. The discovery of subcultural sites, plus a personal mapping of the city streets, enables them to begin to explore their own stories.

²¹⁵ The Hall Carpenter Archives, Gay Men's Oral History Group, Walking After Midnight, Gay Men's Life Stories (London: Routledge, 1989) 44.

The more public ways of knowing the city are re-written. Matt Cook argues that it is these overlapping understandings that make the city so important for writers exploring homosexual subjectivity and subcultures: 'For the city was not only a place where homosexual men congregated, it was also where the individual met a subculture and a subculture met society most intensely.'²¹⁶

The Narrator of Who was That Man? is escaping from a small town and is desperate for the freedom and anonymity afforded by the city. He remembers back to the 1970s when he was sixteen and heading to London, which represented sexual experimentation and freedom. He confesses: 'I used to get an erection just waiting for the train.' (xix) and the eroticism of the city is apparent throughout Bartlett's novels. For the Narrator the city offers sex, unlike small town where he grew up:

1981 was the first year that I actually lived here, and that was when I discovered that a city has nights as well as days. That summer the city was full of men, hidden, just waiting for me.' (xx)

The combination of heat, shadows and secrecy is a potent mix. Matt Houlbrook comments that from the early twentieth century '...public *urban* culture shaped a complex and vibrant public *sexual* culture, predicated upon moving through the city, gazing and searching for contact.'²¹⁷

However, coming to London, the Narrator observes, '...isn't something you do just by stepping off the train; it takes years, believe me, it's taken me years...' (xx) He has had to learn the codes and language of the city, how to negotiate its streets. An alternative gay

²¹⁶ Matt Cook, "A New City of Friends" History Workshop Journal 56. 1. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) 53.

²¹⁷ H.G. Cocks and M. Houlbrook, The Modern History of Sexuality (Basingstoke:Palgrave, 2006) 138.

geography recognised spaces other than the official sites and monuments. At the time he arrived, Soho was the centre of avant-garde, gay and sexual culture. Since the 1920s, Frank Mort writes, the district had become ‘part of a network of homosexuality adjacent to the theatre world of Leicester Square.’²¹⁸ Mort points out that: ‘From the late nineteenth century a plethora of guides and literary souvenirs emphasised that Soho did not possess an ‘official’ geography. Rather, its space could only be known by initiated tourists.’²¹⁹ The lack of an official geography conferred a sense of freedom and excitement to the streets of Soho, making them attractive to those who were ‘initiated’.

On moving to the city, the narrator of Who Was That Man is able for the first time to link his life to other lives and histories and even to buildings and streets. He listens to the stories of other gay men and recognises his need for a sense of community. Coming to London means ‘moving into a life that already existed’,(xx) connecting his life to others who were there before him, for the city has an established gay subculture. He is no longer experiencing his gayness in the isolation of a small town and observes: ‘...gradually I’ve come to understand that I am connected with other men’s lives, men living in London with me. Or with other, dead Londoners. That’s the story.’ (xx) It is through a wider sense of belonging that he is able to articulate a sense of self. The young man arriving in the city in the 1980s is not original, writes Diane Chisholm: ‘He becomes who he is by making himself over in the character of a species of urban dweller that came into existence in the late 1800s. He owes his existential becoming to a historic production.’²²⁰

²¹⁸ Frank Mort, Cultures of Consumption (London: Routledge, 1996) 153.

²¹⁹ Frank Mort, Cultures of Consumption (London: Routledge, 1996) 151.

²²⁰ Dianne Chisholm, Queer Constellations: subcultural space in the wake of the city. (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2005) 113.

On arrival in London, the Narrator's growing awareness of the existence of a gay past runs parallel with his exploration of the city. He discovers his history in much the same way as he discovers the contemporary city – by wandering the streets, pausing at sites which interest him: liminal spaces that are both public and private, maybe bars, or bathhouses. The search for his past is interwoven with walking the city. He goes to a pub someone recommends, visits an address he spots in the newspaper, 'or sometimes you simply follow someone you fancy and discover a whole new part of town.' (xxi) Sexual discovery is mapped onto newly discovered geographies of bars, clubs and bathhouses, the settings for Bartlett's characters.

He is cruising the streets like the men who have wandered there before him, the men whose bodies, as de Certeau describes 'follow the thicks and thins of an urban 'text''²²¹, creating their own interweaving 'maps'. Bartlett observes that this is how the city's geography is learnt: 'eventually you build up a network of places and people.' (xxi) Mark Turner describes cruising as a practice that can re-write the experience of the city: 'The overlapping passing moments of the streets imply many ways of moving and seeing; in which the city allows for alternative and divergent kinds of experience.'²²² The discovery of history in this way goes against the grain of traditional, scholarly historical research and assemblage and challenges chronological, linear history.

²²¹ Michel de Certeau, "Walking in the City" ed. Simon During The Cultural Studies Reader (London: Routledge, 1993) 153.

²²² Mark Turner, Backward Glances (London: Reaktion, 2003) 46.

Bartlett's Narrator starts his search for history in the library. This might seem like a traditional move, but he does not work in any traditional methodical way. Instead, he *cruises the shelves*, moving randomly from 'clue to clue' and 'book to book', in the same meandering way that he cruised the streets. (xxi) Bartlett has described his own research in similar terms, describing it as 'collage' and himself as a 'magpie' taking existing work and re-arranging it to create a new picture.²²³

The Narrator is searching the library for the missing stories of gay and working class men, looking for evidence that has been pushed into the margins of history. He buys four big scrapbooks in which he sticks words and pictures from the London of 100 years ago. He goes to galleries and museums and:

Gradually I began to learn the geography and language of 1895 or 1891, redrawing my map of the city, to recognise certain signs, certain words. I began to see this other London as the beginning of my own story – and up till then, like a lot of other men, I'd seen America and 1970 as the start of everything. (xxi)

The Stonewall riots have been the focus of his gay identity up until this point. In June 1969 police staged one of a number of raids on the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar in Christopher Street, New York. This time the gay and transgendered people fought back. This was the start of the New York Gay Liberation Front. The Christopher Street Gay Pride March followed in June 1970. While still understanding the importance of this historic turning point in America, the Narrator is also starting to realise that *his* history was made by men living in London centuries before 1970. He is learning that in the city he will find what Matt Houlbrook

²²³ Neil Bartlett, lecture and reading, "Queer Discipline" seminar. Kings College, London, Strand Campus (9 Mar. 2004).

describes as ‘the accumulated historical tracks of queer male networks’.²²⁴ The use of ‘tracks’, implies that these networks are created by walking, at street level.

The Narrator is discovering that, as Jeanette Winterson points out, cities are living things, where the energy of the past can be tapped into.²²⁵ He is starting to understand that:

It matters that the patterns of my life were set by men who came before me. It matters that much of the sexual geography of this city was established a hundred years ago, not five years ago when I moved here. (xxii)

He is referring to the layers of history to be found in the city – visible seams in the buildings, but layered in stories that are passed down. The sexual geography of the past is often repeated, with many of the city locations frequented by gay men in Wilde’s time still popular meeting points for gay men today. Matt Houlbrook points out the longevity of Hampstead Heath and Hyde Park, a meeting place since 1800, and the ‘scale of the public culture’ that developed within them.²²⁶ The sexual geography of these sites is still repeated because: ‘...the parks’ cultural and physical organization informed a distinctive sexual microgeography, predicated upon the interplay between public and private.’²²⁷ Sites which destabilize the public/private divide are important in Bartlett’s novels and his characters regularly occupy parks, bars, bathhouses and department stores.

²²⁴ Matt Houlbrook, Queer London: Perils and Pleasures in the Sexual Metropolis, 1918-1957 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005) 6.

²²⁵ Margaret Reynolds and Jonathan Noakes, Jeanette Winterson (London: Vintage, 2003) 19.

²²⁶ Matt Houlbrook, Queer London: Perils and Pleasures in the Sexual Metropolis, 1918-1957 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005) 53.

²²⁷ Matt Houlbrook, Queer London: Perils and Pleasures in the Sexual Metropolis, 1918-1957 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005) 54.

As Bartlett's Narrator has discovered their stories, he has fallen in love with some of the men from the past. They have led him into different parts of the city, to the East End and to Soho, but coming to London doesn't just signify arriving in a particular place. 'The city' is a metaphor for a community, a life that does not seem possible outside the metropolis – a storehouse of layers of history which can be tapped into and experienced, a promise of people to be met.

The Narrator finds himself in Victorian London but this is significant not only because he is in Oscar's time. It was also at this time, Michel Foucault claims, that: 'The nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage'²²⁸. Sodomy had been seen as a forbidden *act* but, in nineteenth century England:

Homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphroditism of the soul. The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species.²²⁹

Travelling home late one summer night in 1981, the Narrator is watching the quiet streets pass by – The Strand, St. Mary's, Fleet Street, official sites which include the home of the press. When the bus turns into the secret, hidden spaces of the East End, the Whitechapel pavement is 'yellow with gaslight' as the Narrator re-imagines the nineteenth century.(233) He is in a liminal space, neither work nor domestic, on the margins of the city. This place of alleyways and arches particularly resonates because it is a site of resistance: 'In January 1879

²²⁸ Michel Foucault, The History of Sexuality: Vol. 1. The Will to Knowledge, Trans. Robert Hurley, (London: Penguin Books Ltd. 1998.) 43.

²²⁹ Michel Foucault, The History of Sexuality: Vol. 1. The Will to Knowledge, Trans. Robert Hurley, (London: Penguin Books Ltd. 1998.) 43.

the unemployed made the journey [from East to West End] roaming the streets in violent mobs.’ (145) These streets were once the site of violent struggles between those with power and those without, where the working classes refused to be silenced.

Who Was That Man suggests three ways in which a gay history *might* be written. The first is in the form of the individual’s coming out story which ends with the ‘I’ assuming a ‘coherent contemporary identity.’ (24) However, this story is only representative of the experience of one individual.

The second way suggests a history of homosexuality itself, ending with ‘we’ arriving at a ‘coherent contemporary culture’. (24) This is the history of the group, but to assume a ‘coherent contemporary culture’ is to leave no room for difference, for which the term ‘queer’ allows.

The final approach to writing history could be through the study of a homosexual hero, suggests the Narrator. This ends with him ‘truly deciphered, and enshrined’ and has the sense of something iconic and religious.

Yet all three suggestions are problematic. The narrator of Who Was That Man argues that to recount the story solely from the point of view of a gay hero, for example, would leave many gaps in the narrative. There would be many missing voices of other men on the margins of the hero’s story. He points out:

To get a picture of Oscar, surely I have to include those men sitting either side of him at the table in the Solferino Restaurant in Rupert Street in the spring of 1893. What are Parker and Taylor's stories? I can't find them. What did they do when it was all over? (29)

Words like 'coherent contemporary identity' and 'deciphered' suggest that history can be known and complete and the questioning will stop, but Bartlett is arguing *against* accounts of history that suggest that it can ever be complete. Today, states the Narrator, we have not left the older city behind: 'We remain unlikely, fictional; we continue to produce and reproduce ourselves.' (228) Bartlett echoes the arguments of Hayden White, who maintains that a good historian will regularly remind his readers of the 'purely provisional nature of his characterizations of events, agents, and agencies found in the always incomplete historical record.'²³⁰

Bartlett, too, proposes a history that is constantly being re-written, re-imagined by new generations of gay men. He offers another way of assembling the past: collage, or rearranging fragments to make them into something new; foregrounding the texts that are in the margins. He gives an example of this with a description which evokes memories of photos of Joe Orton and his walls decorated with cuttings.²³¹ In the room of each of the Narrator's lovers or friends is a collection, perhaps a wall of photos, a bookshelf or an array of postcards. Look closely at these, the Narrator suggests: 'If you or he can "read" this collection of words and images, with all its attendant justifications, juxtapositions and cross references, you will have a gay story, a history.' (24)

²³⁰ Hayden White, Tropics of Discourse: essays in cultural criticism (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1978) 82.

²³¹ John Lahr, Prick Up Your Ears (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980) Plates 15-18.

The reader is asked to actively engage with the text, to re-order the fragments to create new stories. Each collection is individual and will never be finished. History is a collage that is constantly changing and the reader's story is part of it. The Narrator points to the men at the end of the nineteenth century who hunted for proof of a previous gay existence. These men 'perfected the arts of a much less scholarly approach. They engaged in the inspired queenly assemblage of fragments of history.' (227)

Diane Chisholm comments that collecting was particularly fashionable in the nineteenth century. She observes: 'Bartlett mimes not only a nineteenth-century practice but specifically the practice of that man whose story he seeks to tell. Wilde was a collector of rare and beautiful objects: china, books, paintings, and men.' ²³²

An example of just such a collector is the reformer George Ives (1867-1950) who built up a huge secret archive of gay history in a diary and a scrapbook of cuttings. Ives was a Londoner and campaigner for homosexual law reform.²³³ Like Bartlett and his protagonists, Ives used the technique of collage in order to build a history which deviated from, and challenged, the grand narratives. In A Gay History of Britain, Matt Cook traces a direct line from Ives to the Gay Liberation Front's challenge to misogyny, sexism and homophobia in the 1970s.²³⁴ Ives protested against Victorian perceptions of 'morality' in the mid 1890s, by starting a secret

²³² Dianne Chisholm, Queer Constellations: subcultural space in the wake of the city. (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2005) 127.

²³³ Matt Cook, London and the Culture of Homosexuality, 1885-1914 (Cambridge :Cambridge University Press, 2003) 143.

²³⁴ Matt Cook, A Gay History of Britain (Oxford: Greenwood World, 2007)180.

society, the Order of the Chaeronea, dedicated to setting all lovers free. According to Cook, the Society ‘represented the beginnings of a challenge to the moral order, and the embryonic origins of gay liberation.’²³⁵

Ives left an archive which includes a 122 volume diary running from 1886 to 1950 which described ‘homoerotic routes around the city – routes which intersected and diverged, and which mapped a new politics of homosexuality on to the urban terrain.’²³⁶ With sections in almost indecipherable code, the diary reflects on the relationship between London and homosexuality.

Like Who Was That Man’s Narrator, Ives used the technique of collage, or bricolage, to assemble a scrapbook which included indexed cuttings from newspapers and periodicals, especially reports of court cases involving homosexuality, as well as personal photographs and memorabilia. Cook observes:

He religiously collected accounts of court proceedings involving homosexuality... Alongside these are reports of cricket matches and chess games (his two sporting passions), eccentric human and animal behaviour, cross-dressing men and women, injustice and prison conditions and all things Greek.²³⁷

²³⁵ Matt Cook, London and the Culture of Homosexuality, 1885-1914 (Cambridge :Cambridge University Press, 2003) 138.

²³⁶ Matt Cook, “A New City of Friends,” History Workshop Journal 56. 1. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) 35.

²³⁷ Matt Cook, London and the Culture of Homosexuality, 1885-1914 (Cambridge :Cambridge University Press, 2003) 143-4.

Ives is involved in a process which is continued by the Narrator of Who Was That Man and Bartlett's Mr Page. In a dominant heterosexual culture, argues Andy Medhurst, gay men are denied positive representations of homosexuality, so they have had to 'fashion what we could out of the imageries of dominance, to snatch illicit meanings from the fabric of normality.'²³⁸

Ives' diary and scrapbook both anticipate future readers, as do the Narrator's scrapbook in Who Was That Man? and the journal of Bartlett's Mr Page. They are legacies left for future generations who may be attempting to fill the silences in official history. They anticipate a time when they will not have to be hidden away and can be read openly. Ives re-imagined the city in his writing, weaving it in with his ideas of 'homosexual subjectivity, community and politics.'²³⁹ Cook argues that 'In living and describing a homosexual life in the city it was as important to chart ... an independent and personalized mapping as it was to share in a sub-cultural network of places and experiences.'²⁴⁰

The Narrator of Who Was That Man uses scrapbooks to record gay history and create his own maps of the city, rewriting the more public and official ways of knowing London. Matt Cook observes: 'These overlapping understandings are perhaps what made the city especially compelling for writers exploring homosexual subjectivity and subcultures, and the place of

²³⁸ Andy Medhurst, "Batman, Deviance and Camp" The Many Lives of the Batman: critical approaches to a superhero and his media ed. Roberta E. Pearson & William Uricchio (London: BFI, 1991) 153.

²³⁹ Matt Cook, "A New City of Friends" History Workshop Journal 56. 1. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) 34.

²⁴⁰ Matt Cook, "A New City of Friends" History Workshop Journal 56.1. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) 53-4.

both within society.’²⁴¹ When Bartlett’s characters arrive in the city it is the experience of this subcultural network which enables them to chart their personal maps. The Narrator states:

The scrapbook is the true form of our history, since it records what we remember, and embodies in its omissions both how we remember and how we forget our lives. We are always held between ignorance and exposure. (99)

A scrapbook is a personalized mapping of history. It can juxtapose and highlight words and images that would have been lost or hidden from official histories and can make the ephemeral significant. An example of this is the use of camp, highlighting glitter that hasn’t traditionally been considered valuable, or through the use of Polari to spice up a sentence. Andy Medhurst argues for the importance of camp as a survival tactic in an intolerant environment, with its origins in: ‘...gay men’s attempt to simultaneously fend off and undermine heterosexual normativity through enacting outrageous inversions of aesthetic and gender codes...’²⁴² Camp can be ludic but is also a formidable weapon, as Bartlett’s characters in Ready To Catch Him Should He Fall illustrate.

In Who Was That Man, anecdotes and diary extracts from a young gay man in London between 1985 and 1986 sit alongside press cuttings and extracts from the trials of Wilde, Boulton and Park. Classical poems and pictures are side by side with snippets of Proust, another gay hero, Plato and Polari, representing the juxtaposition between high and low

²⁴¹ Matt Cook, “A New City of Friends” History Workshop Journal 56. 1. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) 54.

²⁴² Andy Medhurst, “Camp” Lesbian and Gay Studies, A Critical Introduction ed. Andy Medhurst and Sally Munt (London: Cassell, 1997) 279.

culture, with each given equal weight. These scrapbooks draw no firm conclusions, argues the Narrator: ‘They only bear witness to the need to collect and keep and compare notes. They amass evidence, reminding us that it is never true that we are silent, or safe, or that our speech is safe from those who would silence or forget us.’ (99)

The word ‘speech’ highlights the importance of oral history as a way of chronicling a gay past and makes reference to the gay and lesbian oral history projects started in the 1980s. Speech can be silenced in a number of ways: prosecution for obscenity or the failure to recognise accounts of ‘unofficial’ history. The evidence here that is amassed is a secret history, in the form of collage and fragments. The assembling of a scrapbook in these novels is part of the process of ‘coming to London’; coming out or ‘going in’ to gay society. (206)

As part of his journal, the Narrator describes his experience on Bank Holiday Monday 1985. He cycled around London, met friends and was aware of a strong police presence on the streets – in Brompton Cemetery and on horseback on Hampstead Heath. The start of that summer was very important in queer history for in response to the ‘threat’ of AIDS, gay men in London were being carefully watched by police. According to Jeffrey Weeks, ‘The media panic about AIDS, largely fed by homophobia, far from galvanizing government, had terrorized it.’²⁴³ The Narrator points out that nothing in his own, personal experience of events on that day warranted a public record:

There is no evidence of that weekend. If someone ever wants to remember, to reinterpret that geography...then they will need more than what survives in the newspapers to help them. What survives can rarely give a complete picture. (126)

²⁴³ Jeffrey Weeks, The World We Have Won (Oxford, Routledge, 2007) 17.

A record of his experience as a gay man at that time would have balanced the hysteria in the press. In the 1980s, media and physical attacks on gay men were common in the wake of AIDS which the tabloids dubbed the ‘gay plague’. Chief Constable of Manchester, James Anderton, was quoted in The Independent (12th December, 1986), describing the spread of AIDS as the result of ‘degenerate conduct’, adding ‘People at risk are swirling around in a human cesspit of their own making.’²⁴⁴

In the mid 1980s there was a growing focus on social and moral issues from the Conservative government. Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, used her 1987 conference speech to ‘question those who claim to have an inalienable right to be gay’²⁴⁵ In 1988 Clause 28 of the Local Government Act attempted to prevent the ‘promotion’ of homosexuality by local government and schools.

The Narrator of Who Was That Man? understands the importance of amassing ‘evidence’ against the attempts to silence him which were all too common at the time. He starts his scrapbook by copying quotations out of old books, in an attempt to discover his past: ‘I thought there was nothing, and so wanted to hoard what I found.’ (96) This ‘erratic labour of love’ (96) is inspired by a discovery in the British Library, a repository of cultural memory, while reading the anonymous poem Don Leon, dated 1866. In the back of this book is an appendix, ‘a kind of scrapbook or commonplace book, “evidence” assembled in the 1830s and 1850s. It mainly contains newspaper reports of prosecutions involving gay men. Mixed

²⁴⁴ Jeffrey Weeks, Coming Out: Homosexual Politics in Britain from the Nineteenth Century to the Present Revised Ed. (London: Quartet, 1990) 245.

²⁴⁵ Matt Cook, A Gay History of Britain (Oxford: Greenwood World, 2007) 204.

in with these cuttings are ‘scraps of erotica and quotations, literary exotica, quotes from Ovid, Petronius, Horace, Castiglione, Pepys.’ (96) He is discovering a legacy for himself; one he thought was non-existent.

On the Narrator’s wall ‘a handsome face is pasted up next to a fragment from a novel, next to the latest report of an arrest or persecution.’ (96) This juxtaposition of seemingly unrelated texts creates a new story. As George Ives did, a hundred years before, he diligently copies out three separate newspaper reports of suicides resulting from public accusations of ‘indecent’ and ‘improper intimacy’. (98) If he can only find his history documented in court cases, then that is what he will assemble. The Narrator comments: ‘My contemporary collection is as eclectic as its model. I simply moved from book to book, following clues, reading anything and keeping everything.’ (99) Clues have to be followed because gay history has been driven into the margins and the process of re-assembling it involves investigation. There are no indexes or neat historical catalogues available. The collector reads and keeps everything because it may not have an immediate resonance, but in the light of another later discovered scrap its significance may emerge. These fragments are a collage of the past that often surprise him, but theirs is a history that does not lie through omission. He observes: ‘A diary lies if it gives too neat a pattern to its furiously assembled history, if it never surprises you with its events and choices.’ (100)

The Narrator’s own scrapbook is a personal store of history, important because the personal is political. As Jeffrey Weeks observes, it is ‘the macroscopic impact of subtle changes in

individual lives that makes up the unfinished revolutions of our time.²⁴⁶ It is these ‘revolutions’ that Bartlett maps in his work.

The Narrator’s scrapbook is assembled between 1982, just after he comes to London, and 1986. Arrival in London is the impetus to begin creating his story. Alongside the scrapbook he keeps ‘another text, equally personal’, but the contents of this one he doesn’t share with the reader. It is a list of ‘...names and addresses recorded in the diary of the first four years of my life here (the diary we all kept).’ (99) There was a need to record this important time of transition, although in the 1980s he is still unwilling to share any of these details in a climate where gay men are regularly ostracised, abused, and attacked. The use of ‘we’ points to a community, one that is recognizable to the assumed reader.

The diary contains accounts of ‘...encounters with men, details of sex and infatuations, books read and fashions imitated are all listed with equal and equally sincere enthusiasm, as if by writing it down I could make sense of it all.’ (99) He has to collect all the stories, because there is no official gay history that he can go to. He is assembling fragments and laying them out as a witness to the existence of a queer London, binding the collection together as history. No voices are excluded because of sexuality, race or class. The past and present often overlap:

Each historical fragment could be paired with a contemporary detail, the name of the man I thought of as I read that, the name of the one who loaned me the book, the one who distracted me from that anger. Both collections are somewhat random; neither is a summary, the result of a systematic search. In the twenty years from 1875 to 1895 Oscar Wilde changed from the student at Oxford to the married man in Chelsea who

²⁴⁶ Jeffrey Weeks, The World We Have Won (Oxford, Routledge, 2007) 7.

lived too many lives and appeared too much in public. And from 1982 to 1986 I changed, and the city changed. (99)

Bartlett explores the potential and pleasures of secrecy in his novels. While the ability to express sexual identity in a public space can be seen as a basic right, invisibility is not always negative. Richard Hornsey argues for a celebration of ‘...the public invisibility of queers, and the relational networks, encounters and sign systems that can exist only under the surface of everyday urban space.’²⁴⁷

In Who was That Man? Bartlett celebrates this public invisibility when he points to Polari, the secret coded language of gay men in the city, to illustrate the joys of secrecy and the pleasures of being incomprehensible. He writes of the fun of playing with the words: ‘Mostly the words are dusted off and brought out when we wish to *zhoosh* up the conversation.’ (82) He describes Polari as the remnants of a gay slang of the nineteenth century, although Jeffrey Weeks points to evidence of an extensive homosexual vocabulary in London throughout the nineteenth and eighteenth centuries.²⁴⁸ ‘Later,’ writes Bartlett, ‘in the forties and fifties, our city was decorated with a gay slang of which whole sentences survive.’ (81) It is no longer necessary to speak in code, he argues, but the language is always there, to be used and enjoyed:

We don’t have to speak apart from the world. But the words are still there, however, should we need or want them, lying like spare jewellery in the bottom of the drawer. (81)

²⁴⁷ Richard Hornsey “The Auratic, the Symbolic and the Everyday: Thoughts on Queer Visibility” abstract Queer matters Conference Programme (London: Kings College, 2004).

²⁴⁸ Jeffrey Weeks, Coming Out, (London: Quartet, 1990) 42.

The imagery of jewellery is of something handed down through the generations, a valuable heirloom there for those who understand. The past is not silenced.

Who was That Man?, with its emphasis on collage and bricolage as strategies for assembling and reading gay history, is a rich text to return to when reading Bartlett's work. The book is itself a collage; in writing it Bartlett has created a paradigm for his approach to gay history in the city.

Mr Clive & Mr Page

Mr. Clive and Mr. Page recounts the memoirs of a gay man in his fifties, looking back to his arrival in London in the 1920s. Bartlett again subverts the traditional diary form, presenting Page's story in the form of a collage, which destabilizes any sense of linear narrative. The novel's intertextuality mixes journalism, letters, diaries, witness statements and numerous extracts from popular culture of the twenties and fifties.

The novel invites the reader to share in the secret diary of a man who calls himself 'Mr. Page', bank clerk at Selfridges. Page begins his journal in an attempt to understand and banish a recurring dream that is plaguing him every night. He has had the dream for about four months and each night the events move on, just a little. Now he is trying to lay his ghosts to rest, explaining: 'I don't want to have that dream again, you see. Not with his eyes closed like that. That's why I am still sitting here at three o'clock in the morning writing.' (104)

The diary is fragmentary. Page slips between the 1950s and the 1920s, repeating the story of his dream, each time giving a little more information. Page regularly refers to his 'crime' – the expression of his sexuality in the twenties and fifties, and he writes under an assumed name. At the time of his writing, in the 1950s, 'all male homosexual acts, whether committed in public or private' were illegal ²⁴⁹ The prison sentence for buggery, from ten years to life, was still to be in operation until 1967.

²⁴⁹Jeffrey Weeks, Coming Out (London: Quartet, 1990) 14.

Page is also another magpie, like Oscar Wilde and Boy in Bartlett's Ready To Catch Him Should He Fall. Amongst the leaves of his journal are hoarded scraps of paper including letters, pictures, articles from historical and art journals and newspaper cuttings. The reader must make the connections between a tabloid article about Rock Hudson's 'shame' at being thrown out of a London bathhouse and a beautiful, golden boy at the window of a Mayfair mansion.

The connection is found in Mr Page. The reader has to unpick a set of clues, like a detective. The cuttings and articles that appear between the diary's pages can illuminate Page's story if we rearrange the fragments to create a new narrative.

Written retrospectively in 1956, his diary tells the story of his 1920s meeting with the rich and enigmatic hero, eligible bachelor and man-about-town, Mr Clive Vivian. Page's dream centres around 18 Brooke Street, Mr Clive's Mayfair home. The house symbolizes Clive's status and family heritage, in the centre of fashionable West One. Wealth could buy privacy, essential if someone wanted to pursue a gay lifestyle and avoid arrest in the 1920s. As Matt Houlbrook comments, the richest gay men could afford 'a respectable and secure residential space within which to forge lives insulated from the dangerous public city.'²⁵⁰

²⁵⁰ Matt Houlbrook, Queer London, Perils and Pleasures in the Sexual Metropolis, 1918-1957 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005) 113.

Page can't afford a W1 address; he lives in a rented flat in Camden Town, not considered a particularly fashionable place in the twenties or the fifties. Mr Page has to keep his fifth floor flat 'discreetly disguised or concealed' (77) and his personal life a secret from his work colleagues of thirty years. Page comments: 'You could stand in the middle of this carpet and look round this flat and take a good look at every single thing I've got here and have absolutely no idea.' (33) There are no clues to Mr. Page's sexuality in his flat; nothing to incriminate him, to indicate that he is gay.

The 'house' that Page is more familiar with is Selfridges, where he works as a bank clerk. Selfridges is certainly one of the most luxurious department stores in town, but its luxury is *public*. Rachel Bowlby points out that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century department stores became so popular because of the principle of 'open entry' where most people were welcomed in, regardless of class, to browse and dream.²⁵¹ The shop was a space of domesticity, but public.

Clive's London spaces are discreet and self-contained. Page's London is the shop, his rented flat and the market. Though far more cosmopolitan than life in a small town, his world is still far more public than Clive's. When Page envies Clive's life, it is the privacy and space that he desires most of all. That is why his dreams are focussed on Clive's home.

The diary's starting point is Page's arrival in London and his excitement at the prospect of his first Christmas in the city, in a room of his own. Like the Narrator of Who Was That Man?,

²⁵¹ Rachel Bowlby, Just Looking (London: Methuen, 1985) 4.

he relishes his first taste of independence with a sense of awe: 'I was to be on my own, in London...' (22) and shows excitement at his invisibility. Coming from a small town to the city, he feels a freedom in the crowd where no-one knows him. He observes:

People who don't live here always say that the thing about London is that you never bump into anyone by accident. And certainly I can remember the feeling of walking down Piccadilly or Oxford Street when I first got here, and thinking, no one knows me; no one in all this crowd knows me. (27)

His greets this anonymity with elation, responding to the erotics of the street. Matt Houlbrook writes that in the early twentieth century, modern street culture led to particular forms of sexual interaction: 'Indeed, the opportunities to gaze upon passersby were often imagined as a near-erotic source of pleasure.'²⁵²

The young Page soon realises, however, that this is not always the case. There are certain pockets of freedom in the city, like the bathhouses, but even in these he has to be discreet. Codes have to be used between gay men, especially in public places. Prosecution for a 'misdemeanour' or 'act of gross indecency' could lead to prison.²⁵³ Page describes the elaborate rituals of cruising in the 1920s:

I was watching him walk up Jermyn Street towards the Haymarket; and when he reached the corner he looked back over his shoulder at me, and then obviously I looked away, because I didn't want anyone thinking I was staring at them, certainly not a stranger, because it wasn't as if it was anyone I knew.... (28)

Mr. Page sounds desperate to explain his innocence of any misdemeanour.

²⁵² Matt Houlbrook, "Cities" The Modern History of Sexuality ed. H.G. Cocks and Matt Houlbrook (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006) 137.

²⁵³ Jeffrey Weeks, Coming Out (London: Quartet, 1990) 14.

Secrecy is still a necessity, if not more so, in the fifties and Page writes under an assumed name. He wants the diary to be read, yet he is afraid of arrest and prosecution. We don't even know who he is. He could be any gay man at this time –and that's the point. The early 1950s was a period of great anxiety for gay men as the number of indictable homosexual offences increased five-fold in the fifteen years following the end of the Second World War.²⁵⁴ Page admits to his reader that he's lied about details, of his job and even his name, in order to be able to tell his story: 'I've lied to you... Of course I have. This is nineteen-fifty-bloody-six; I read the papers.' (174) The papers in 1956 regularly carried reports of men arrested for soliciting or importuning, as Stephen Jeffrey-Poulter describes:

By the early 1950s anyone reading newspapers which specialised in the 'shock! horror! school of popular journalism could not have failed to notice the growing number of reports of court cases concerning what was euphemistically termed 'improper behaviour' between males (the term 'homosexual' was noticeable only by its absence).

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In the Hall Carpenter Archives, recordings of gay men's lives in the twentieth century, Bernard Dobson makes reference to a 'witch hunt of gays...' ²⁵⁶. The 1953 trial of actor John Gielgud for soliciting in Chelsea²⁵⁷ is still fresh in Page's memory and he quotes recent headlines: 'Actor Arrested, Solicitor Found Dead'. (52) Page has his way of coping in this climate:

²⁵⁴ Jeffrey Weeks, Coming Out (London: Quartet, 1990) 158

²⁵⁵ Stephen Jeffrey-Poulter, Peers, Queers and Commons (London: Routledge, 1991) 11-12.

²⁵⁶ Hall Carpenter Archives, Gay Men's Oral History Group, Walking After Midnight, Gay Men's Life Stories (London: Routledge, 1989) 68.

²⁵⁷ Matt Cook, A Gay History of Britain (Oxford: Greenwood World, 2007) 168.

...well, everyone's keeping their heads down at the moment and quite right too. No carrying on at the moment like there is sometimes. Soliciting Male persons for Immoral Purposes. "These Evil Men." (53)

In 1952 the Sunday Pictorial ran a series on homosexuality entitled 'Evil Men'. Jeffrey Weeks writes that the series was described as 'a serious attempt to get to the root of "a spreading fungus"'.²⁵⁸ Homosexuality was described as something that could spread and corrupt, like a sickness.

Mr Page's fears echo those experienced by John Alcock who, interviewed for the Hall Carpenter Archives in July 1985, described living as a gay man in the 1950s:

I thought that every policeman coming up to me in the street was going to arrest me. I always looked over my shoulder when I was bringing a gentleman home to entertain.....The temperature of the time was quite unpleasant. We thought we were all going to be arrested and there was going to be a big swoop. The newspapers were full of it.²⁵⁹

Writing in such a sexually repressive climate, Page presents much of his journal in code, yet anticipates a reader who will be able to understand its secret signs and references: 'Oh yes, I've been very careful. And you have got to be careful, "these days", as Mr Clive always said, especially with the names.' (175) Mr. Page is uneasy about starting his journal and won't even admit to it being *his* diary:

I never kept a diary and I don't know why I'm...

Except that this isn't a diary really. (16)

²⁵⁸ Jeffrey Weeks, The World We Have Won (Oxford: Routledge, 2007) 47.

²⁵⁹ Hall Carpenter Archives, Gay Men's Oral History Group, Walking After Midnight, Gay Men's Life Stories (London: Routledge, 1989) 52.

It is more than a diary – it is a way of validating his experience and a legacy for gay men who will follow him. That is why he feels he must write it. Yet even in this private journal, Mr. Page feels the need to be discreet. In describing a walk along Jermyn Street, he writes:

There was another man, somebody who I ...

Somebody who I thought I recognised... (27)

This pause shows him stopping and re-wording. He should have written: ‘who I was following’, ‘who had been in the baths earlier’, as he tells us later. But he is too aware of the law against soliciting to say that, too used to the repression of gay sexuality.

Worried that it might fall into the wrong hands, he wonders:

Supposing somebody did read this.

But on the other hand, if they knew what it meant, then they wouldn’t tell anyone else, because then they’d have to explain how and why they knew. (33)

Mr Page has to make his diary so oblique, that it can only be understood by a reader who will have sympathy with its contents. At the start of the journal there is a disclaimer:

This is a work of fiction. Author’s note: no reference is intended in this book to any actual person, living or dead, nor to any actual place (other than well-known districts and streets, etc.), and any similarity either of name or description is coincidental. (That’s what they always put. Not that I’m ever likely to show this to anyone, am I?) (19)

The conversational tone belies his statement. He has a need to share with other men who will understand his situation and have had similar experiences; contemporary gay men who know his city and who are attempting to map their own Londons.

Ambiguity is necessary in order to avoid arrest, both in the 1950s and 1920s. Matt Houlbrook notes that: 'Between 1917 and 1957, hundreds of men were imprisoned for sexual or public order offences committed in London's public, commercial, or residential spaces.'²⁶⁰ Page makes constant references to the 'crime' in which he is involved - the simple expression of his desires. Sections of his journal are presented in the form of an interview with a police officer: 'What? Oh nothing, Officer. Nothing. No Officer. What, me? No, no I haven't seen them. Of course I haven't - I didn't.' (186)

Page's tone is often guilty, as if he is looking over his shoulder and this is understandable. Houlbrook points out that the risk of arrest often seemed ever-present for gay men in the fifties and many lived with 'a crippling perpetual anxiety'.²⁶¹ That anxiety is constant for Page. He feels he must cover his tracks and his fear is apparent in his description of his second meeting with Mr. Clive. By not using the first person he is distancing himself and appears to be making general, rather than personal comments:

I mean, you notice these things, don't you? You - well, you get to know pretty quick that if somebody doesn't have a good reason to be standing around then there is only one god reason for them to be standing around. If you see what I mean. (29)

If he uses 'I' he could implicate himself in a crime. But the pronoun 'you' is also a direct address and has the effect of suggesting a complicit reader.

²⁶⁰ Matt Houlbrook, Queer London, Perils and Pleasures in the Sexual Metropolis, 1918-1957 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005) 36.

²⁶¹ Matt Houlbrook, Queer London, Perils and Pleasures in the Sexual Metropolis, 1918-1957 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005) 36.

Fear of discovery permeates every part of his life for, as Page points out: ‘...this is not like other crimes.’ (140) Amidst all of this anxiety, one place where Mr Page is able to find sanctuary is Jermyn Street. This is a street, he says, which has ‘everything a gentleman needs’ (15) It is in an area where the gentleman can visit his tailor or his club, yet it is close to the fashionable arcades in Piccadilly and the West End. The street is the epitome of upper class respectability: ‘No Brylcreem down there; it’s all very Gentleman’s Pomade.’ comments Mr. Page. (16) Yet, paradoxically, it is also a gay cruising ground. As Mark Turner observes, a fashionable address for the aristocracy, ‘Jermyn Street and the area around St James has continually been re-imagined and appropriated queerly.’²⁶² Page meets Clive for the first time outside the baths and observes: ‘I could see that he’d positioned himself at just the right angle so that he would get a good view of anyone coming out of the baths, reflected in the glass; I wasn’t that green.’ (29) Both men understand the codes of the streets.

Just as he is in awe of Brooke Street, so Page adores Jermyn Street, saving for six months for a silk dressing gown, with hand-rolled, butter-yellow piping. Jermyn Street signifies the gentleman – everything Page aspires to and Selfridges sells. That is also why he finds Clive so attractive. Page is in love with Mr Clive’s privileged world and all its trappings: things unspoken, codes understood, secrecy. Jermyn Street signifies male space and vanity. ‘The whole street is quality’ (15), writes Page.

But the main attraction of Jermyn Street for Mr Page is the London and Provincial Turkish Bath. Opened in 1862, the London and Provincial stood behind an existing hotel at 76 Jermyn

²⁶² Mark Turner, Backward Glances (London: Reaktion, 2003) 78.

Street. They offered steam rooms, plunge pools and massage parlours. The baths closed in 1941, a few weeks before the building was destroyed in the London blitz.²⁶³ Mark Turner describes the bath as ‘sensuously mysterious and ornately decorated...a place of male leisure and pleasure in the heart of the West End.’²⁶⁴

Page smiles when he imagines shoppers struggling along the icy streets, unaware of the secret world of the bathhouse operating under their noses: ‘...none of them having any idea that a bit further down and turn right there’s all the regulars in Jermyn Street sitting stark naked like a row of orchids in a steamed-up greenhouse.’ (15)

The Jermyn Street baths epitomise Mr. Page’s delight in secrecy. They are self-contained – a place where men can meet men. Matt Houlbrook comments that:

...the baths were simply beyond the knowledge of most Londoners – including the Met and the LCC for long periods of time. This, in itself, is a remarkable testament to the security the baths offered: this was a commercial space in which men felt safe enough to have sex relatively openly – a public space which was, in effect, private.²⁶⁵

This is not *any* bathhouse, however. The Jermyn Street address gives it an air of exclusivity that Page seeks. The men are described as orchids, rare specimens; pale because they are inside, hidden, preened and nurtured.

²⁶³ Malcolm Shifrin, Victorian Turkish Baths (3 Mar 2006). < <http://www.victorianturkishbath.org> >

²⁶⁴ Mark Turner, Backward Glances (London: Reaktion, 2003) 74.

²⁶⁵ Matt Houlbrook, Queer London, Perils and Pleasures in the Sexual Metropolis, 1918-1957 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005) 94.

Mr Page is upwardly mobile. He aspires to Clive's lifestyle and the baths are the closest he gets to it. Matt Houlbrook describes the baths as an 'informal gentleman's club'.²⁶⁶ He observes:

There is a further anomaly in the intersection between social class and this kind of sexual culture. While many workingmen, shop assistants, or clerks frequented the baths, their clientele was primarily drawn from the professions, business, or high society.²⁶⁷

Like Selfridges, the baths represent luxury that can be acquired for a fee.

Page's diary description of his life in London in the 1920s is a collage. In amongst its leaves is a collection of documents. There are extracts from articles about London architecture, in particular 18 Brooke Street, a copy of a speech by Gordon Selfridge, an account of a Bruegel painting, a Daily Mirror article about Rock Hudson, an extract from 'The Diaries of Hugo Rumboldt', a gay socialite, and more letters.

At first sight these fragments appear to bear little relation to Page's diary but, as the narrator of Who Was That Man points out: 'Sometimes you have to stop and re-read and think why this magpie has included a particular text.' (97) Only another gay man, or those with a knowledge of gay history, will read the connections.

²⁶⁶ Matt Houlbrook, Queer London, Perils and Pleasures in the Sexual Metropolis, 1918-1957 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005) 95.

²⁶⁷ Matt Houlbrook, Queer London, Perils and Pleasures in the Sexual Metropolis, 1918-1957 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005) 94.

When Boy tries to make sense of his history in Ready To Catch Him he moves his pictures around, placing different ones next to each other on the floor, making new connections. Similarly, by juxtaposing different cuttings with different sections of Page's journal, links can be made. The article on Rock Hudson leads back to the time when Page saw him in the Jermyn Street baths and points to the secret world the baths represent. Hudson is important in queer history as a Hollywood star who had to hide his sexuality to protect his career, but was outed by AIDS. Close inspection of the Rumboldt diary gives clues about the relationship between Mr.Clive and his servant, Gabriel: 'I should say from his choice of staff that our Mr Clive was more interested in the blonde than the dusky.' writes Rumboldt. (37)

Rumboldt's diary is full of anecdotes from the lives of upper class gay men in the 1920s, which he calls 'Mayfair stories' (38). There is much name-dropping of the rich and famous – a camp story about Lady Londonderry 'attempting to wear the Stewart, Vane and Tempest jewels simultaneously and practically falling down the stairs of Lansdowne House under the sheer weight of her emeralds.' (38) plus observations on the 'rather good Venetian glass plates.'(38)

His first impression of Page is that he is 'one of the other guests' rent.'(37) This is a society with spending power where the privileged can purchase their young men. Mr. Page tells him about all the products that can be bought in Selfridges on credit. The wealthy Rumboldt doesn't know about this – he's never needed to use credit, unlike Mr Page.

As a working-class man, Mr Page has to live a double life. During the week, he keeps himself to himself on the way into work in Selfridges, when the shop assistants are chatting in the lift. They ask him about Christmas: ‘On your own again this year, Mr Page, I expect?’(12) He imagines them gossiping behind his back, commenting that: ‘It must be so sad knowing that’s how they’ll end up, don’t you think?’(13) But they know nothing about his life, as Mr Page explains: ‘...Mr. Page, Banking, Monday to Friday’ is one person, but another exists on Saturday.’ (29) After conforming all week, he can allow himself to live on Saturdays, a secret life that the ladies from haberdashery know nothing of:

If you’ve seen someone inside the baths, then of course when you meet them outside you are bound to be a bit wary,.....but at least you know where you are, and I don’t mean just knowing what they looked like in the changing room, though of course that helps. You know. You know how it could feel half an hour from now or however long it takes to get back to where he lives or some place that he knows. And after all, it is Saturday, it is your day off.’ (33)

Every day is a day off for Mr Clive, however. With a private income he does not need to take a bus to work every day. He lives in the centre of town and it is his playground. Mr Page shares the same birthday with Mr Clive and he thinks they could have been twins, but for the fact that they are on ‘different sides of the counter, so to speak.’ (30) Mr Page uses imagery of consumption to describe their differences:

He was having his suit made top measure in Jermyn Street and mine was from Menswear, first floor; he was coming out of his tailor’s and turning right towards Simpson’s and St. James’s, and I was going to go left and walk all the way up to the Dominion and catch the number twenty-nine. (30-1)

Page is 'staff' at Selfridges, albeit in the banking section, and shares their dream of going up in the world. Occasionally a rich customer will marry a shop girl and it is a cause for celebration when announced in the staff magazine because '...it was a sort of revenge on all the customers.' (66) There are occasions when working for a retailer such as Selfridge's that the staff become part of the privileged culture by association. One of the great excitements is '...discussing who's been spotted and what they ordered this time, whose portrait was brought in by that nice Mr Beaton to be developed in Photographic last week.' (58)

Although Page's diary is a written account of his memories and dreams, it sometimes reads like a transcript. There is a sense of an oral history, a direct address to the listener/reader with asides that assume the listener is involved: 'That's right; Mr Page is taking a day off work, can you believe it. Four days I said I'd need, well it's going to take me five, and that's that. Thirty odd years and five days.' (163)

Through his journal he is leaving a legacy, speaking to gay men in the future, voicing a secret history of thirty years in the city. The diary is a validation of his life, speaking at last of feelings that were silenced at the time. When he is describing the occasion that he and Mr. Clive slipped on the icy street, Mr. Page employs a curious mixture of the erotic and the banal:

We ended up face to face with our arms round each other. Which is an odd way for two men to meet. Just for a moment we were looking right into each other's eyes. With our breath rising and mixing between us. You do see these little accidents happening when the pavements are icy like that. (28)

The short sentences create a sense of urgency. The emotive language builds up to a crescendo of anticipation in the description of rising breath, only to end with the matter-of-factness of ‘You do see...’ which represses the romance. Page feels he has to stop himself, to be careful, to make this description something ordinary and everyday instead of a charged, passionate encounter. ‘You do see’ and ‘little accidents’ are there to make it seem there’s nothing at all suspicious or illegal about what he’s describing.

Yet Page becomes driven by an urgency to get his story finished. This is like a confession, or a series of therapy sessions. He needs to talk but he can’t trust anyone ‘these days’. Weeks observes that ‘...the fear of homosexuality ran like a thread throughout the decade.’²⁶⁸ Hugo Rumboldt alludes to a similar situation in the 20s, musing: ‘One never does really talk, I suppose,’ (39)

At times, however, there is a sense of Page enjoying his secrecy, as when he confides: ‘I do things all the year round that they can’t possibly imagine me doing, not that nice Mr. Page from Banking,...’ (13) On another occasion, he delights in the attention he receives in the local market, and revelling in the coded messages and camp approaches from the greengrocer’s boy:

That one boy, the one with the forearms who works on the greengrocers by the petshop, he’s the worst. Cheeky. Giving me the whistle when he sees me coming. But I can tell he knows of course really I love it, ‘And what can I do for you, sir,’ he says. Cheeky sod. (14)

²⁶⁸ Jeffrey Weeks, The World We Have Won (Oxford: Routledge, 2007) 21.

‘With the forearms’ is very camp. Surely all the shopboys and market traders have forearms? But this one has *the* forearms. As in Ready to Catch Him and Skin Lane, the boy is an object of beauty and desire.

There is also an edge of excitement to his description of himself and Mr. Clive as ‘partners in crime.’(140) The phrase suggests adventure and discovery. Page uses Selfridges’ lift to describe his imaginary relationship with Mr. Clive. Every morning he reads a coded story in its gilded bronzes, not apparent to the girls from Haberdashery:

There is Mr Page, Banking, and there face to face with him in the gold glass mirror is his double, the other Mr Page – sometimes I think I can even see him smiling...all the twelve signs of the zodiac in gilded bronze. It’s not what you expect first thing in the morning on respectable premises. Each sign has a naked man in it – with his back turned, of course, or with a bit of towelling, so that it’s all very classical. (65)

Images of male nudity which would ordinarily be seen as offensive are acceptable if they are ‘classical’. Page’s thoughts transport the gods, in their towelling wraps, to the Jermyn Street baths. His fantasy continues: ‘And the Gemini, the Gemini of course are Mr Clive and me, eye to eye again after all these years.’ (65)

Here is high camp and romance, a homoerotic reading of the lift decorations, invisible to the shopgirls but gloriously obvious to Mr. Page. The image of erotic male bodies in unexpected places is a theme that runs throughout the novels. In Ready To Catch Him statues of soldiers at a war memorial are depicted holding each other tenderly, another public spectacle of homo-eroticism that goes largely unnoticed. When Mr Page refers to himself as ‘the shopgirl’

(15) and to Mr Clive as ‘very much the proper hostess’ (57), he is drawing on a rich seam of the city’s past language with a camp reference to femininity.

Embodying the worlds of Page and Clive are two ‘houses’, Eighteen Brooke Street in Mayfair, and Selfridges, at the western, less ‘classy’ end of Oxford Street, referred to as ‘the house’ by Gordon Selfridge. (75) They can be read as metaphors for the lives of Clive and Page. Both contain a private world hidden behind a public façade. Both are apparently models of perfection, everything running smoothly. But Page points out that there is a whole secret world the Selfridges customers never witness: ‘All the running and ordering and carrying that they never see. All so that they can imagine that when they ask for something, it’s there as if by magic.’ (63)

The designer of Mr Clive’s house was apparently inspired by retail premises at the end of the nineteenth century, so it has something in common with the Selfridges clerk. As in a department store, all the workings of the building and the domestic labour go on behind the scenes. The central heating is operated from a furnace room: ‘...which avoids entirely the dust and dirt and noise and unwanted labour of coal and ashes in the house...’ (15) Clive describes:

...double ceilings to eliminate the carrying of any sound from any part of the house to another, and, of course, my grandfather’s Staff Corridors, giving such remarkably convenient and sudden access to all the rooms in which service is required... (14)

He has absolute privacy, unlike Page, who could never give ‘anyone’ his number, as the ‘phone was in the hallway downstairs, ‘...like it so often seems to be in films where the police get involved.’ (53) Here Bartlett makes use of intertextuality, in his reference to Basil Deardon’s 1961 film Victim, which explored blackmailers and the gay men they preyed upon in 1950s London. It conveyed the problems of the law and endorsed the proposals of the Wolfenden Report.²⁶⁹ Dirk Bogarde took a great risk with his career when starring as the gay lawyer, though in the climate of fear in the world outside the film, he chose to remain secretive about his own sexuality.

Brooke Street affords Mr Clive a level of independence and guarantees him the privacy to pursue his relationships. This is something that Page does not have in his small flat, reached by a public staircase. He has often had to tell someone from the baths that he has nowhere to go, nowhere that they can have any privacy together. For Page, 18 Brooke Street represents freedom and power, the home of a gentleman. Unlike Page, Mr Clive’s inheritance allows him the space to protect his secrets.

Prestigious addresses, such as Mayfair, allowed a gay man such as Clive an independence that Page could only dream of. The Brooke Street house is a respectable and safe space in which he can live a life which would be highly dangerous in Page’s rented flat. Houlbrook writes: ‘Those who could afford private rooms, join exclusive clubs, or rejected the disreputable public realm could remain officially invisible.’²⁷⁰

²⁶⁹ Victim, dir. Basil Deardon, perf. Dirk Bogarde (Allied Film Makers/Parkway, 1961).

²⁷⁰ Matt Houlbrook, Queer London, Perils and Pleasures in the Sexual Metropolis, 1918-1957 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005) 3.

In spite of Page's fear and caution, however, he conveys the excitement and wonder of the young man newly arrived in the city and mapping his new life onto its streets and sites. He conveys this through images from fairytale; images of secrecy, magic and romance. His first view of 18 Brooke Street takes his breath away, with the settling snow 'outlining the great red blocks of stone, making it look more like a castle or prison than a house. And it seemed older than the other houses somehow.' (23) He feels like a character in a fairytale, whose dreams have come true. He is mapping his excitement at the promise of his first Christmas in the city onto the house. His initial reaction to the inside of Number 18 is 'Talk about another world.' (23) Because it is so quiet, he begins to imagine it as a magic house from a children's story '...where the doors are opened and the meals served and all the things get polished by invisible hands.' (25)

The influences on Bartlett of gay icon, Jean Cocteau's 1945 film La Belle et La Bete²⁷¹ are evident here, another story with a silver-haired beauty, played by Cocteau's lover, Jean Marais. Bartlett explores this fairytale further in his 2007 novel Skin Lane. The image of the house becomes entangled with the dream sequence that runs throughout the novel. Doors to servants' corridors are covered with heavy curtains, as in Sleeping Beauty. This motif is continued through to the image of Clive and Page's sleeping white-haired beauties, the significance of which can only be decoded after the final dream where we see Page's 'Darling' with his silver hair on his deathbed.

²⁷¹ La Belle et La Bete, dir. Jean Cocteau, perf. Jean Marais (Lopert Pictures, 1946).

Page has never been to a house in Mayfair before and he is enchanted by the mystery of

Number 18:

Even though you knew you were right in the middle of London you felt you could have been standing at the gates of Manderley, or that you were Beauty lifting the great brass knocker and hearing the noise echo through the Beast's lair. Little Red Riding Hood standing outside the cottage with the snow settling on her hair and wondering why it was all so quiet, wondering why Grandmother was taking so long to answer the door. (23)

There are recurrent references to Manderley from Daphne du Maurier's Rebecca, another house with dark and mysterious secrets. Mr Page has much in common with the second Mrs. De Winter – the figure who has only known life 'in service', standing looking up at the façade of the house and its locked gates and doors.

Both Manderley and Brook Street offer intrigue. Page links the opening of Rebecca to his first sight of Clive's house. The second Mrs. de Winter dreams of going to Manderley again. Page's recurring dream is of re-visiting Brooke Street:

And you know just from those first words that you're going to see the house again, and you're going to find out what happened there, and even though you know already, you shiver, because you're going to find out all over again.

The first time I went to number eighteen Brooke Street it was in the snow. (21)

John Sears describes the narrator of Rebecca as 'structured into a narrative of repetition',²⁷² and draws parallels between Du Maurier's novel and Bartlett's, pointing out that: 'Repetition compensates in symbolic form for that which has been lost and enacts in ritualized form the

²⁷² John Sears, "All Over Again: Form, Subjectivity and Desire in Neil Bartlett's *Mr Clive and Mr Page*" Critique (44.1. 2002) 51

encounter with lack that constitutes the subject-in-desire.’²⁷³ Bartlett repeats this structure of repetition in his latest novel Skin Lane, where the motif of a replayed dream dominates the narrative again, as an attempt by the protagonist to negotiate loss.

The fairytale of the Brook Street house evaporates when, later, Page is given a guided tour by Mr. Clive. He spots a long bare corridor, white-tiled, lit by a long row of unshaded bulbs.

There is a sense of recognition of a world he knows all too well:

...but of course I thought it looked just like the corridors at work. Mr. Clive explained to me how every room in the house had a hidden door, so that visitors need never see the staff, but I already knew about that.... That’s the whole point. As Mr Clive said, “What you don’t want people to see, they don’t see”; and I said, “Yes, I know” again, which made him look at me, again. (62)

They both understand that there are things a gay man has to keep hidden in the Nineteen-twenties.

On completion, the house on Brooke Street was apparently criticised by architects for being both ugly and incomprehensible:

One report described it as “a house with something to hide”. (*The Studio*, London, January, 1888.) It is only with nearly a century of hindsight that the historic implications of the house’s construction can be fully understood. (84)

²⁷³ John Sears, “All Over Again: Form, Subjectivity and Desire in Neil Bartlett’s *Mr Clive and Mr Page*” Critique (44.1. 2002) 51

It is only with hindsight that Mr Page is able to understand the secrets the house was hiding. When he first visits Brooke Street, he is stepping into a part of London that is totally unknown to him. He gives very specific details as to its location:

I turned left down Gilbert Street, and put all the noise and the crowds behind me. And there on the corner it was, tall and dark and red. I didn't go straight to the front door; I crossed over Brooke Street and stood under the street lamp and took a good look at it. (22)

These directions convey a sense of moving into a discreet, private world. The Mayfair mansion signifies wealth, power and secrecy, a closed world. A huge arch 'protects the concealed front door.' (118) When it is opened, those inside cannot be seen. A very different experience to that of Page with Mrs Welch living below, reading all the scandal in the *Daily Mail*.

The motif of Page, the bank clerk, standing outside and looking up at the house is repeated throughout the text, to suggest the impossibility of his longings. In his recurring dream, he seems destined to be on the outside looking in. As he stares up at the dark red stone, he is overawed: 'Nobody can see you in there and nobody can hear you, I was thinking, not behind those great stone walls. Imagine being in that situation.' (132)

With his private income, Clive can buy whatever he wants. Mr Page observes that, unlike Clive, he was brought up to believe that money couldn't buy everything:

I mean we tell the customers all the time that we can get them anything they could possibly want, anything at all – that's the whole point of a Department Store, after all – but the one thing that really matters, you can't but that. The thing you think about when you're on your own in the dark. The thing you wait and wait and wait for. (181)

Mr Page says he does not buy in to this myth, but he does. He realises that the beautiful white-haired manservant at Brooke Street is not a trusted valet, but someone that Mr Clive has purchased. Page finds a collection of drawings of a boy looking like Gabriel and dressed like him. It seems that Clive collected them long before the boy arrived and he understands: ‘That’s what he was doing on Jermyn Street; he wasn’t just looking for a suit that would fit him perfectly, he was looking for someone to wear those uniforms in the drawings.’ (181)

When Clive couldn’t find what he wanted in Jermyn Street, he had bought it elsewhere. Page comprehends:

Mr Clive had ordered him. Maybe even ordered him to arrive just in time for Christmas, so that he really was his present, a present that he’d ordered and had delivered by taxi on Christmas Eve. Just like his grandmother had ordered all the things for the house. You wouldn’t think that things like that could just be ordered from a catalogue, because they look too precious, too beautiful. But they can be, you know. Anything the customer wants. (102)

Mr Clive has *purchased* the boy of his dreams and Mr Page begins to wonder: ‘What sort of a catalogue did he find Gabriel in? Was it illustrated?’ (102) Page aspires to Clive’s life, yet he will never have the freedoms that Clive’s fortune bought him. However, he tries to emulate him and tries to purchase his life, buying an identical dressing-gown and decorating his small flat in the same colours as the rooms in Number 18.

When Clive and Gabriel have left Brooke Street, Page walks through the abandoned house, looking for traces of them both. He goes into Mr Clive’s bedroom where there are rows of oils and colognes from Jermyn Street. He notices the brush on the dressing table, still with

some of Clive's hairs in it and: 'I brushed my hair with it for a moment, copying his style.'

(168) Holding up one of the tailor-made suits against himself, Page observes: 'I could have been him.' (168)

He notices the rich pink of the walls and gold lampshades and later has cheaper copies of the designs in his own flat. He even has the same style of sheets on his bed:

Fine sheets they are too. Not what you would necessarily expect to find in a flat like this, as several people have commented on in their time. Not what you would expect from Mr. Page, Banking. Oh yes, quite a taste for the finer things in life.

The finer things in life. Alike in more than just build, Mr. Clive and I were.' (32)

The white-haired man that Page eventually falls in love with, many years later is the closest thing he can get to Gabriel. The one he calls 'my darling' is in his fifties and his hair is white because of his age. Mr Page observes that it is an unusual coupling because most often at the baths the older men are attracted to the younger ones. When he met this man, however: 'it didn't feel like two old boys at all that afternoon. It felt like 1924. It felt like Mr Clive must have felt when he saw his darling with the white hair for the first time.' (202-3) Page is still playing out the role of Mr Clive thirty years after he first saw him.

Coded meanings are often apparent in Mr Clive, whether through a glance on the street, or a complicated message apparently left by Clive after his departure. Amidst the destruction of the dining room, Page discovers a Bruegel picture, apparently left for him. He attempts to

read it as a message from Clive. First, he assumes it's 'The Flight into Egypt' and then manages to fathom out that it is 'The Arrival at Bethlehem'. He writes in his journal:

This is a picture of two people arriving somewhere safely. Mr. Clive must have dreamt of that each time they changed trains. And it isn't the end of the story. It's just the start of it. Christmas is coming, the New Year is coming, all the new years, even nineteen-fifty-bloody-six, in the end. That's what Mr. Clive wanted to tell me, only he didn't have time to write it down, or couldn't find a way of saying it. Or didn't want to leave a note with my name on it; that would have been dangerous.(178)

However, only a few pages back, an art historian's reading of the painting has been included. From a 'publication' dated 1979, it could not have been read by Page at the time of writing his story. However, as so many of the articles/letters juxtaposed against the pages of his journal, it adds an air of naivety to his comments. The 'art expert' points out that despite the scenes of cheer, there is a strong sense of gloom and uncertainty. The darkening sky and images of the leper stress hardship rather than celebration:

In particular, the figures of the children unconcernedly skating on the ice in the lower foreground remind us that the scene is the immediate precursor to its successor both in Bruegel's work and in the Biblical narrative, the *Slaughter of the Innocents* (no.22) which Bruegel was to depict as taking place in the very same village.(158)

Covering his tracks, Page leaves his journal to be found on the top of a bus. Not wanting it to be silenced, he is making it public, placing it deliberately in a place where someone will pick it up and read it. Page anticipates a reader for his diary. He gently 'tucks' (207) a note into the front before he leaves it on the top deck of the number twenty-nine bus. The note reads: 'Please feel free to keep it; I have used up most of the pages, as you can see.' (207) But he

hasn't used them all. There are a few blank pages for someone else to continue, to build on the story started by the 'old boy' on the top of the number twenty-nine. (207)

He longs for an audience that might try to understand or, better still, one that will be able to read the codes contained within the journal. C.B. Vail, Clive's grandfather, left him the house on Brooke Street. Page doesn't have property but he can leave something for posterity. He leaves the diary as an inheritance, a record for those gay men that will follow him – for the future. He's leaving them his history. That's why his diary is so vital. This is not only the diary of a gay man in 1956 looking back to the 1920s; it is the diary of a *working-class* gay man, a man in 'service'. The fact that it is told in his own voice makes it all the more potent than any 'official' historical account.

Significantly, Mr Page's last diary entry is written on New Year's Eve, 1956. New Year's Day will see the start of 1957, the year the Wolfenden Committee will make its recommendations and help to generate the stirrings of change.

And, when the reader looks more closely at some of the articles that appear in between the diary's pages, they may notice that a number are dated long after the journal itself is written. It seems another magpie *is* continuing Page's story. Now that the reader is holding the diary in their hands, maybe they should add to it too.

CHAPTER THREE: NEIL BARTLETT part 2

Ready to Catch Him Should He Fall

Skin Lane

Ready to Catch Him Should He Fall

Skin Lane

‘...I do feel that if we are fighting for anything, and if I was asked in a questionnaire what it was I was fighting for (and believe me I do feel like I am fighting, more and more I think that), then I would answer, beauty. Beauty or whatever you call it that makes you feel that you have no shame any more, none left at all.’²⁷⁴

Unmarked doors in the city’s labyrinthine back-streets link the novels Ready to Catch Him Should he Fall and Skin Lane. These doors hide secrets and open onto worlds of layered history, arcane vocabulary and dreams of a beautiful young boy.

²⁷⁴ Neil Bartlett, Ready to Catch Him Should He Fall (London: Serpent’s Tail, 1990) 13.

Ready to Catch Him Should He Fall

Ready to Catch Him Should He Fall is a romance. It opens with two lovers meeting across a crowded room, one a beautiful nineteen-year-old, the other older. The reader follows their courtship through to the betrothal and the wedding, a glittering ceremony attended by sparkling guests. But Bartlett is subverting the traditional genre. The marriage is between two men and the guests are glorious drag queens.

Set during the height of the AIDS backlash in Britain, the novel defiantly celebrates the potential of camp and drag to fight back against homophobia. It is located in The Bar - somewhere in London, most likely Soho, although the location is kept secret. A safe haven in the centre of the city, The Bar is presided over by Madame, or Mother, a Muriel Belcher-like figure,²⁷⁵ who watches over her boys from the same high stool every night, always in her full-length, white, sequinned gown: ‘...she was the bar and she was also the reason why so many of us went there all the time.’ (56)

²⁷⁵ Muriel Belcher was the proprietress of the Colony Room, a drinking club in Dean Street, Soho, in the 1950s. The club attracted many gay men, and she referred to her favourite customers as her daughters. The Museum of London website says of her that she ‘created an ambience which suited those who thought of themselves as misfits or outsiders.’

<www.museumoflondon.org.uk/archive/exhibits/creative/artistloc/1960/1960-colonyroom.html>

This 'great romance of our times'(4) has an anonymous Narrator who is one of the bit players, the chorus. He tells the story of Boy, who discovers The Bar, 'the place where everybody else was' in the 1980s city. The Bar is somewhere he can feel at home, a place where he can celebrate his sexuality.

The Narrator directly addresses the reader and there is a sense of a shared intimacy with the audience. His speech is peppered with conversational asides such as '... you know...' (16) and there is an assumption of shared knowledge with the reader. The novel is an account of its narrator's personal memories, a history of a gay community and the story of its heroes, Boy and O. The text begins with Boy's arrival at The Bar and is divided into 'Week One, Two and Three', numbering the weeks since he appeared on the scene, and contains snippets of popular songs All of Me (64-5) and fragments and re-workings of texts such as The Picture of Dorian Gray, and Our Lady of the Flowers, classic gay texts. In this novel, as in *Who Was That Man?*, Bartlett brings together religion and gay iconographies. The text is interleaved with letters, documentary evidence and quotations from The Book of Common Prayer. The story itself is a scrapbook of history, re-working events such as the exploits of the cross-dressing Boulton and Park who scandalized the West End in the 1870s. Bartlett is referencing this because Boy is keen to find a history that is relevant to him. As the Narrator in *Who Was That Man?* comments, 'What I've done, I suppose, is to connect my life to other lives, even buildings and streets, that had an existence prior to mine.' (xx) Boy is at the start of this process when he arrives at The Bar.

The Narrator of Ready to Catch Him is part of The Bar's community. He tells its story, aware of its important role in gay history:

I can see that people must have thought we were being very mysterious then, that we were a bit of a mystery, that The Bar was a very strange place; but it never seemed that way to us. To us, it was as normal as home. (23)

The Bar had no name painted on the door. Its name was always changing: 'The Jewel Box', 'The Gigolo' or 'Grave Charges'. The names reflected the current mood of Madame and her boys, in a camp code. Camp is employed defiantly as the Narrator remembers The Bar like a scene in a musical, with the characters 'playing our scene for all it was worth.' (26) John M. Clum makes the point that musicals are about 'defiant survival.' Whilst in opera the soprano dies at the end, in a musical the heroine killed in Act I comes back to life for the final chorus. The musical celebrates the survival of gay men, Clum argues: 'We made it through J Edgar Hoover, Joseph McCarthy, Stonewall...and we're still here.'²⁷⁶ In the mid 1980s, at the time of an anti-gay backlash in the wake of HIV/AIDS the need to fight back is all the more vital. Matt Cook points out that at this time the stigma of AIDS was potent:

Isolation was common, and the demonization of gay men as carriers of the 'plague' reinscribed the old connection of homosexuality and pathology in many minds, giving new ammunition to moralists who touted AIDS as a punishment from God and the 'natural' fruit of sexual immorality.²⁷⁷

²⁷⁶ John M. Clum, Something for the Boys: Musical Theatre and Gay Culture (New York: Palgrave, 1999) 7.

²⁷⁷ Matt Cook, A Gay History of Britain, (Oxford: Greenwood World, 2007) 199.

The Bar represents an unofficial community and family and at the same time, secrecy and a degree of protection from this prevailing atmosphere. At a time when Section 28 is instructing schools not to promote ‘the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship’²⁷⁸, The Bar is providing an alternative family for the boys, many of whom have distant relationships with their own, as the Narrator points out: ‘Sometimes I think we’re all parentless, and that The Bar is just one big orphans’ home anyway, and that’s why we use all those words all the time to each other, Mother, Daddy, Baby, Sister.’ (235)

The Bar family nurtures its members thanks to Mother, who is constantly trying to ‘educate’ her boys about their history in the city. She is a repository of gay memory, teaching the boys songs, telling them stories of their past and preparing them for their futures. The Bar is one of the first places in the city to offer free condoms, displayed by Mother, in a holy water stoop by the door. The narrator observes that: ‘...when you walked in the door of The Bar you knew you didn’t have to explain anything to anyone who was there, not anyone.’ (23) There is a shared understanding of codes and signs. Below the surface of the city is a hidden world – a warren of corridors and concealed rooms. Negotiating the city can only be done through recognition of these codes. To find the way to the door of The Bar a riddle must be solved:

...first there is a wedding, and then there’s a death, and there’s the news, and then there’s us; meaning, first there’s the shop with the flowers, the real ones, and next door to that is the undertakers with the fake flowers in the window, china, all dusty; and then the newsagent’s and the magazine shop, and then right next door to that is The Bar. You can’t miss it. (17)

The use of ‘you’ suggests a shared understanding with the reader/listener. The tone is conversational, as if a secret is being shared.

²⁷⁸ Matt Cook, A Gay History of Britain, (Oxford: Greenwood World, 2007) 205.

While the ability to express sexual identity in a public space can be seen as a basic right, invisibility is not always negative. Richard Hornsey argues for a celebration of ‘...the public invisibility of queers, and the relational networks, encounters and sign systems that can exist only under the surface of everyday urban space.’²⁷⁹ .

There is no name over the door of The Bar. In the past, before 1967, its location was kept secret through necessity, to avoid prosecution. The habit has continued, sometimes for the fun of secrecy, although recently it has seemed a necessity once again. Matt Cook cites fifty five murders of gay men in Britain between 1986 and 1989; twenty eight of them in London.²⁸⁰ Alongside the descriptions of the high camp nights in The Bar, the novel is peppered with reports of attacks on gay men who are simply attempting to move about the city:

At the moment of Boy’s arrival, at the very moment that he was standing there framed in our doorway, hesitating...at that same time on that same first evening there was a terrible attack on one of the men from The Bar. (31)

While Boy has arrived in a pocket of safety, the city streets are still dangerous. As one gay man finds sanctuary, another is in danger. It is this juxtaposition that serves to question a reading of the city as simply liberating for gay men. As Matt Houlbrook points out, ‘simple images of the city as offering freedom to gay men ignore the experiences of those for whom

²⁷⁹ Richard Hornsey “The Auratic, the Symbolic and the Everyday: Thoughts on Queer Visibility” abstract Queer matters Conference Programme. (London: Kings College, 2004).

²⁸⁰ Matt Cook, A Gay History of Britain, (Oxford: Greenwood World, 2007) 205

it is both threatening and isolating.’²⁸¹ Bartlett emphasises this point by interleaving descriptions of the blossoming love between O and Boy with stark reports of violence on gay men in the city streets:

And at three or four a.m. that morning, as O and Boy kissed for a second time, the blade of a Stanley knife sliced for the second time across the cheek of a man (I don’t remember his name, it wasn’t anyone I knew) who was at the time on his own, not with anyone, just waiting on his own, at a bus stop, waiting for a night bus which was due at any minute. (96)

The repetition of ‘for a second time’ draws the two events together and emphasises that love and violence exist simultaneously on the city streets. The Narrator doesn’t know the name of this man, but that does not stop him being touched by this event. The victim could have been any gay man in these violent times.

As well as violent physical assaults, the attack on the gay community also comes from those who are apparently upholding the law. Jeffrey Weeks writes of changing attitudes to homosexuality in the eighties, under the impact of AIDS:

Symptomatically, and perhaps more significant than any major legal change, there was a distinct closing of social space.... There were various raids on gay social facilities. More symbolically, there was a major raid and seizure of books by HM Customs and Excise on Gay’s the Word Bookshop in London in April 1984.²⁸²

Gay’s the Word was, and still is, not only a bookshop but an important meeting place and information centre for lesbians and gay men; a place to go on arrival in the city in order to begin mapping it for yourself. It provides support, friendship and information. In the 1980s

²⁸¹ Matt Houlbrook, Queer London : Perils and Pleasures in the Sexual Metropolis, 1918-1957 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005) 5.

²⁸² Jeffrey Weeks, Coming Out (London: Quartet, 1990) 238.

against the backdrop of the attempts to stifle gay social space similar sites, such as The Bar, were extremely important:

One of the things about The Bar was that you felt safe there, so strong, and it was difficult to talk about being frightened when you were in The Bar. (149)

Andy Medhurst explains the importance of camp against such a background, stating that for years gay men have used camp as a survival mechanism against the most hostile circumstances: ‘Camp has sustained and nurtured me for many years, giving me an invaluable blade to cut through the throttling tendrils of normative masculinity.’²⁸³ The use of ‘blade’ emphasises the depiction of camp as a weapon against bigotry and hatred. Camp’s ‘in-your-face’ refusal to conform presents what Medhurst describes as ‘a strategy of defensive offensiveness’.²⁸⁴

The men in The Bar use camp as a defence against throttling public opinion, but they *also* use it because it’s fun. A sense of playfulness and anticipation still accompanies the directions to The Bar and one of the major ways of affirming a queer narrative in The Bar is through camp. Andy Medhurst describes camp as ‘one of our most fearsome weapons...and one of our most enriching experiences’²⁸⁵ and camp is employed in this way by Madame and the boys. Theme nights have such titles as ‘At Marble Arch I met a Serviceman’ and the exotic

²⁸³ Andy Medhurst, “Camp” Lesbian and Gay Studies, A critical Introduction ed. Andy Medhurst and Sally Munt (London: Cassell, 1997) 276.

²⁸⁴ Andy Medhurst, “Camp” Lesbian and Gay Studies, A critical Introduction ed. Andy Medhurst and Sally Munt (London: Cassell, 1997) 276.

²⁸⁵ Andy Medhurst, “Camp” Lesbian and Gay Studies, A critical Introduction ed. Andy Medhurst and Sally Munt (London: Cassell, 1997) 275.

‘Night in Old Cairo’. (153) Those were some of the best times, recalls the Narrator. They were:

nights to remember, ‘White Nights on the Nevsky Prospect’, nights when you walked home with diamante ground into the soles of your boots, mornings when you woke late and found sequins glued to the skin of your stomach with sweat. (153)

The juxtaposition of traditionally feminine diamante and masculine boots serves to underline the delicious ambiguity of camp and the way it calls in to question accepted notions of gender. The Narrator observes: ‘And so you see the Bar always felt a bit like a theatre.’ (154) While his assertion that: ‘We believed in theatre.’ (153) proclaims the serious function of performativity as a weapon.

As a dramatist, Bartlett believes in the power of theatre and one of many examples of this in his work is his monologue Where is Love? It was regularly performed at AIDS benefits in the late 1980s and ends with the song All of Me that Mother always sings for her boys in The Bar. In an introduction to the song, the shirtless but booted speaker faces his audience and announces:

I’d like to dedicate this song to anyone who fancies me just because I’m dressed like this and I would like most especially to dedicate this song to all those people who have in the last three months verbally, physically or otherwise abused, assaulted and humiliated me because I am a homosexual, and I would most especially like to dedicate this song to the six men I met on the number fifteen bus last Wednesday evening and I would like to say, boys: this one is for you.²⁸⁶

The monologue encapsulates the strong and conflicting feelings that many were experiencing at this time, feelings which are replicated amongst the regulars at The Bar,

²⁸⁶ Neil Bartlett, Solo Voices (London: Oberon, 2005) 12.

and which Bartlett describes as ‘Exhilarating defiance, numbed pain; almost disabling anger.’²⁸⁷

Two characters at The Bar are named Stella, a direct reference to Ernest Boulton or Stella, Star of the Strand and Frederick Park, two flamboyant and popular cross-dressers regularly to be seen in, and regularly ejected from, theatres and public spaces around the West End. They were arrested leaving the Strand Theatre in April 1870, dressed as ‘Stella’ (Boulton) and ‘Fanny’ (Park), and tried in 1871 with conspiring to commit sodomy. In the trial it became clear that they were not simply drag queens. They were not women in public and men in private, alternately visible and invisible, but had passed, with success, as ladies: ‘That is, they adopted a public style, a style which made public their sexual identity.’²⁸⁸

Bartlett states:

Only by silencing, not punishing, the sodomites, could the court breathe a sigh of relief. When Boulton and Park were dismissed, declared improbable if not impossible, the existence of a homosexual culture in London was effectively denied.²⁸⁹

At The Bar, the boys are actively reaffirming the existence of this culture through camp and queenery. The Narrator describes the clientele:

On a good night you’d have Ron Ackroyd; Terry and Bobby (and Bobby’s Mother); Sandy and Eddie; Big Janet (she was always in); That Awful Hugh Hapsley; Teddy, Tiny, Leaf, Minty Winter; Madge, also known as The Troll; Miss Public House; and, of course, Mr Mortimer. Stella I’ve mentioned; Stella I was her full title, she would be sitting at the bar, and then later, Stella II would be sitting there beside her. (24)

²⁸⁷ Neil Bartlett, Solo Voices (London: Oberon, 2005) 9.

²⁸⁸ Neil Bartlett, Who Was That Man? (London: Serpent’s Tail, 1988)134.

²⁸⁹ Neil Bartlett, Who Was That Man? (London: Serpent’s Tail, 1988) 142.

The Narrator points to the queens' way of talking. It's fun, but the listener has to imagine what is *really* being talked about. In The Bar, the 'girls' are exchanging rude asides, but underneath there is a protective current:

Stella again: 'Good evening, Sean, Remember what I told you; the first lesson's free.'

Greta, on seeing me leave with an especially handsome man: 'I hope you're on the pill.' (25)

The drag queens play a special role when Boy is prepared for his wedding with O, an event which is part of a tradition which includes the weddings of men in London's Molly houses in the eighteenth century and which continued to operate in London until well into the 1820s.²⁹⁰ Boy is experiencing the period of final preparation, referred to as 'The Robing of the Bride.' (190) During the week running up to the wedding, Boy is dressed as a schoolboy, a soldier and a small town queen. On the last night he has to become a woman. Stella explains to Boy about drag, that it is 'one thing to drag up on stage and another to walk down the street as a woman.' (197)

Stella then describes a violent attack on someone in drag that she witnessed on a night bus, explaining in detail how the attacker used a screwdriver like a knife. She then screams at Boy all the worst, most humiliating insults that men and women have ever thrown at her, beginning with: 'You cunt, you bitch, you stupid fucking bitch, you stupid queen, do you know what I would like to do to you, you stupid fucking queen?' (198) The Narrator explains that Stella was teaching Boy everything she knew about survival:

²⁹⁰ Matt Cook, A Gay History of Britain (Oxford: Greenwood World, 2007) 108.

...well you have to remember how strange the times were. Dangerous, looking back, although I don't remember anyone using that word at the time. You have to remember that we lived in a city in which, according to the latest figures, 63 per cent of the population did not think that people like us should exist. (202)

Opinion polls reflected a growing hostility to lesbians and gay men throughout the 1980s. In 1983, 63 per cent were against gay relationships; in 1985, 69 per cent disapproved and in 1987, the numbers were 74 per cent.²⁹¹ There was a deep fear that young people could become corrupted by gay men. The Narrator recalls: '82 per cent did not think that the names of men like us, or rather, 'men like that' should be read out at school assemblies, especially those involving younger children.' (202)

There was much outrage in the media when, in 1983, Gay Men's Press published a translation of the Dutch children's book Jenny Lives With Martin and Eric. After its 1987 election victory, the Conservative party stepped up its 'family values' campaign, targeting Labour controlled local authorities who were encouraging the development of positive gay and lesbian images, particularly in schools. This was closely followed by a further attack on the gay community through the addition of the insidious Clause 28 of the 1988 Local Government Act. The clause stated that local authorities should not promote homosexuality or publish material that did so, nor should they promote the teaching in schools of homosexuality as 'a pretended family relationship'.²⁹² Jeffrey Weeks writes that the term would echo through the next decade as a warning to the gay community: 'thus far and

²⁹¹ Jeffrey Weeks, The World We Have Won (Oxford: Routledge, 2007) 17.

²⁹² Matt Cook, A Gay History of Britain (Oxford: Greenwood World, 2007) 205.

no further'.²⁹³ However, for the men in Ready To Catch Him, there is nothing 'pretended' about the family relationships amongst the community in The Bar.

The Narrator makes the point that outsiders are often critical of The Bar, taking one look through the door and observing that the boys are not having such a good time, that they are really defeated and scared in these dangerous times. He responds defiantly with:

All I can say is, I think they must never have spent a night in The Bar if they think that, or never a good night. I want to say to them, when they talk like that, *well, where do you go in the evenings?* Playing like we played wasn't lying at all, it was nothing to do with lying.

What did you expect us to do? Sit around and be depressed? Madame always had a little stage set up there at the end, and I remember thinking at the time, well, seven nights in a week and seven different acts, it's one way of dealing with the situation.
(26)

Ready To Catch Him Should He Fall is a collage. There are fragments and re-workings of songs, diary extracts, letters, reviews, newspapers reports of violence and attacks in the city

(149) It begins with the Narrator holding out a picture of an allegorical figure of strength.

The figure has a miniature city in its hand, a visual metaphor for the characters' journeys. It is naked and beautiful and 'In the palm of his raised, right hand he holds out to you a miniature city, complete with dome, bridges and towers, the freedom of which he is offering you and which he has promised to protect.' (15) The romantic description continues:

Now place around the head of this statue angels; place in his left hand a sword; and light in his realistically enamelled eyes a welcome and a promise such as I had never, never in all my years seen. On this figure depends the rest of our story; it is on those white

²⁹³ Jeffrey Weeks, The World We Have Won (Oxford: Routledge, 2007) 18.

shoulders that all our hopes rest...It is him who will attend our funerals; it is him who will be strong when we are not. (15-16)

Boy is this figure, hence his description as 'history on legs'. He is the legacy of the men at the bar, their hope, their child, their ideal of gay masculinity, which is why they prepare him so carefully for his future.

Before he arrives at The Bar, Boy is mapping the city for himself and is starting to understand that it is important to know about the men who lived there before him.

Boy has been walking the city streets, creating his own map:

Worn out with his own personal brand of window shopping; all that staring and never buying anything, all those shop windows, all those men to stare at and not dare follow, as if indeed there was a sheet of plate glass between him and them.(18)

There was no-one to talk to, no one whose advice he could ask, until Mother and her boys took him under their wing.

Boy has a 'very special' box (51) which once contained the black shoes he bought when he arrived in the city. These were strong, strong enough for all his walking 'and kept his feet from being bruised on the city pavements.'(51) The collection of history is strongly linked with walking the city. In an introduction to de Certeau's Walking in the City, Simon During comments that the walker down below can negate the official map of the city from above: 'The walker individuates and makes ambiguous the 'legible' order given to cities by planners'²⁹⁴ Boy is the walker, making his own maps of the city. It is significant that his

²⁹⁴ Simon During, "Editors Introduction: Michel de Certeau, 'Walking in the City'" The Cultural Studies Reader ed. Simon During (London: Routledge, 1993) 151.

box once housed the shoes he bought when he first arrived in the city and found ‘The Bar’. These were the shoes he wore to discover the city, to learn to negotiate its streets. He was keen to learn his way and daily tramped the pavements, ‘...hoping that somebody would take him to the place where everybody else was.’ (18-19) If they didn’t take him, then maybe they could give him directions, ‘...or at least lend him a map with a cross marked on it, or give him an address.’ (19) Bartlett makes a link between Boy’s cruising of the streets and window shopping. In Who Was That Man?, he writes: ‘The boy, like a purchase, begs to be chosen and taken home.’²⁹⁵ As Frank Mort has commented in his study of Soho, however, some parts of the city did not possess an ‘official’ geography.²⁹⁶ Boy is searching for somewhere that is not on any traditional map.

The box with Boy’s walking shoes is always on the floor next to his bed, tied up with a bow, because it’s so precious. It contains a lot of envelopes. Some hold letters, others pictures. Many of these are old, sepia portraits that he bought at a Sunday morning street market, pictures of men with ‘wing collars and moustaches’. (53) Others are from newspapers, bodybuilding or pornographic magazines. The past is interleaved with the present in a range of often erotic images. Boy is creating his own text, inscribing the images with his own narratives. Like the collection described in Who Was That Man?, Boy’s archive can tell many different stories, depending on how it is read and who is reading.

²⁹⁵ Neil Bartlett, Who Was That Man? (London: Serpent’s Tail, 1988) 253.

²⁹⁶ Frank Mort, Cultures of Consumption (London: Routledge, 1996) 151.

The letters are neither stamped nor postmarked, therefore not official, but each is addressed to one of the twelve places Boy has briefly stayed in the city. Each begins with ‘My Dear Boy’, some hand-written, some typed and many apparently from ‘famous historical figures’ such as Oscar Wilde and the gay poet and critic, John Addington Symonds. Others are all signed with a lipstick kiss in *Nuits de Paris* and the name ‘Fanny’. (Dated 1903 –27) They are full of details about makeup, hair styles and gossip. The writers are ‘detailing the changing fashions of that period’ with the words: ‘*my dear, we never showed our legs like that. Might have got more trade if we did I suppose.*’ (52) These are the words of early twentieth century queens, observes Bartlett. Historical evidence of a gay subculture shows, as Andy Medhurst points out, gay men using camp for survival in a hostile world. Camp confirms that they not only dare to exist but, says Medhurst: ‘... they actively flaunt and luxuriate in their queerness.’²⁹⁷

The letters are relevant to Boy, since he, too, is trying to survive in a 1980s climate in which ‘gay bashing’ is still rife. Matt Cook catalogues two separate and vicious attacks on gay men in the 1980s outside the National Theatre and the Vauxhall Tavern Bar, both popular queer spaces.²⁹⁸ A brief aside states that ‘The letters from 1915-18, were missing.’ (52) No comment is made on this information, which leaves the reader to wonder where Fanny and her friends were. Fighting in France, perhaps?

²⁹⁷ Andy Medhurst, “Camp” Lesbian and Gay Studies, A critical Introduction ed. Andy Medhurst and Sally Munt (London: Cassell, 1997) 276.

²⁹⁸ Matt Cook, A Gay History of Britain (Oxford: Greenwood World, 2007) 205.

A number of letters are typed and there is no indication of date, presumably because they could have been written at any time, 100 years ago or contemporarily, since their contents could still be relevant. These contain ‘advice of a different sort, instructions about where to get sex and how much to pay for it if necessary.’ (53) The signatures on the letters are duplicated across the photos. ‘John Addington Symonds’(53) scrawled across modern coloured images and ‘fuck you anytime, Denny’ on a reproduction of the 1886 Sarony portrait of Wilde. Both men are important figures in gay history, yet their juxtaposition against contemporary texts creates new narratives. In the same way, the narrator of Who Was That Man? describes turning into Villiers Street, home of Heaven gay disco, at midnight and suddenly finding himself walking by gaslight.²⁹⁹ He wants to know how to talk to the men from the past that he will meet there. So does Boy. He wants to hear their stories. He has to ask them to speak of their past because stories about men like them were never considered important enough to be included in official histories.

In order to understand the present, Boy is desperate to discover a history which is his own, yet also collective. He regularly lays out the pictures, changing who is next to who, ‘choosing partners, arranging meetings in a café where they could all talk, all those men who never had had the chance to meet.’ (55) Boy is re-arranging history to make it into something new. He is creating new collages, changing the stories with different juxtapositions, re-writing and filling in the silences with the voices of these men. Boy is creating his own narratives in an active engagement with the text.

²⁹⁹ Neil Bartlett, Who Was That Man? (London: Serpent’s Tail, 1988) xx.

Barthes advocates the pleasures of ‘playing’ with a text which, he suggests, ‘asks of the reader a practical collaboration.’³⁰⁰ Boy is interrogating his texts, asking questions and looking for clues as to their stories. He chooses the men he wants to meet in heaven. He ‘wanted so badly to talk to them’, to question them about their lives and experiences.

The past and present are blurred again in the summer of 1987 when one of the biggest London parks is made into a tourist attraction. It becomes a re-creation of a nineteenth century attraction: ‘The idea was that on certain nights it was turned into kind of historical theme park, a recreation of the way things had been one hundred years ago, and everybody was invited to turn up in fancy dress.’ (123)

When Boy visits the attraction it makes him question the kind of city he is living in, as the city’s past hostility to gay men mirrors that of the present. Gay men are not accepted in this sanitised version of history. At some point in the evening, the crowd thickens and word gets around that two men have been arrested for a ‘misdemeanour’. Suddenly the language has changed: nineteenth century euphemisms are being used to describe their ‘crime’. The men are taken to the Park Police Station, (which is, ironically, disguised as a thatched cottage). Four men from The Bar are also there, dressed up for an elaborate picnic, one wearing ‘rouge and powder’. When they see the policemen, the men abandon their picnic and walk quickly away, splitting up into ‘an inconspicuous pair and two singles and leaving the park by different gates.’ (124) There are echoes of Bolton and Park and all the other cross-dressing

³⁰⁰ Roland Barthes, Image-Music-Text (London: Fontana, 1977) 163.

men arrested for causing a public disturbance³⁰¹. The scene becomes ugly as it seems to slip into the nineteenth century, and the crowd gets into the period spirit, screaming: ‘ ’E’ll ’ave to get his ’air cut regular now...’ (124)

Boy and O sit out the rest of the evening on one of the park’s reproduction benches, smoking their fake nineteenth-century cigarettes, bought especially for the event:

They smoked steadily until they had finished the whole packet, as if they wanted to destroy, or rather consume - not just throw away – their souvenir of this night, which was meant to have been a fantasy for everybody but for them had not been a fantasy at all. (125)

An intolerant and vindictive nineteenth century has broken through the fake tourist attraction. The ‘Nineteenth Century’ Experience for gay men has been tasted at first hand by O and Boy and they have found that in many ways it parallels the 1980s experience. Boy needs to go home, to take out his shoebox and talk to the men in his letters, alone.

The city itself seems to share in the emotions of Boy and O as thunder rumbles in the distance on the night Mother has chosen for their ‘debut’ in The Bar as a couple. In an attempt to highlight their history, Mother chooses ‘the anniversary of the death in prison of the famous writer who had once stayed in the building which was now ‘The Bar.’(163) Some men wear shirts carrying the penultimate stanza of his most famous poem.(168)

³⁰¹ Before their trial for conspiring to commit sodomy, in May 1871, Boulton and Park had been thrown out of the Alhambra more than 20 times and out of the fashionable Burlington arcade several times for ‘chirruping’ at men.

While this is going on, the city is responding in an appropriate way for a romance, with an enormous storm. The weather reflects the tumultuous, dramatic passions of O and Boy's love affair. There are no assaults that night, but, 'the storm had been strong enough to bring the streetlights down and fill the air with tiles coming down like slate knives;' (168) The streets are deserted and above them: 'all the statues of the city were shaken and tested by the storm. They beckoned to each other, their arms upraised against the winds in benediction.' (169) The statues of military men and official heroes are coming to life, but they don't tell the official story any more - the public monuments show a human side. All the statues, like the Narrator, cry at the engagement: 'And on churches, tombstones, banks and derelict theatres, all the angels of London wept;' (170) Significantly, the statue of Justice rocks and sways in the storm, a metaphor for the destabilizing of traditional 'justice'.

Perhaps the most powerfully romantic is the scene in a park on the other side of town, where two war memorials face each other. On one of these, six soldiers stand to attention, with tears running down their faces. Opposite them, two more soldiers hold one to each other as they gaze into the horizon. Like the lovers in *The Bar*, the younger is supported by the elder, who is still standing: '...and the soldier is crying, and he holds his dear Friend's hand, holding on for dear life;' (171) This subversion of the traditional idea of a war memorial is re-claiming gay history, suggesting a tenderness between two men in a hostile time.

AIDS and anti-gay measures such as Section 28 are a constant backdrop to the novel.

Jeffrey Weeks suggests, however, that the clause had exactly the opposite effect on the community it had targeted:

Lesbians and gays were staking their claim for full citizenship as openly gay people throughout the 1980s, in a variety of arenas and with often unanticipated support. The battle against Section 28, as it turned out, served to strengthen rather than undermine their determination.³⁰²

A celebration of this resistance appears in a dream-like sequence near the end of the novel, where when O and his Boy are finally able to stroll slowly through the city, holding hands in public all night without fear of reprisals: 'Inexplicably, no-one looked at them.' (300) This is a celebration of walking in the city:

...and they saw the lights going on all over the city, the fireworks and the great crowds cheering, and plenty to see and plenty to buy everywhere, and amidst all this they felt entitled to walk the streets these two, they felt entitled to stand side by side, to be as remarkable as they were and yet go unremarked. (300)

However, this is not an idealistic view of a city offering freedom. The couple witness the celebrations, but at the same time cannot escape the city's inequalities and discrimination.

They see:

crowds gathering on the streets for all the city's other reasons, the genuine rage, the useless violence, the pleas for justice, the demands for payment, the acts of arson, the insults, the underpaid teachers and nurses and the confident buyers and sellers of everything and the words **BLACK** and **VICTIM** in bold type on the front page of the newspapers... (300)

³⁰² Jeffrey Weeks, Coming Out, (London: Quartet, 1990) 243.

Boy and O understand that gay men are just one marginalized group among many in the 1980s society of greed and exploitation. However, in Bartlett's London the crowd will gather and protest, angry and defiant, like the East End unemployed in January 1879, when those without power refused to be silenced.

The image of Boy as a metaphor for history, like Oscar, is reinforced near the end of the novel after his wedding to O. Unlike the image of the youth searching desperately for a place to be, there is a sense that Boy has come home, has found his part of the city and his history. Boy and O are pictured making love for the first time with 'a complete lack of fear' (217). They are so focussed on each other, that neither notices that:

...hovering over that white and isolated bed, or rather not hovering but crowding, pressing, stretching up on their toes some of them so that they could see, a crowd of fifty or sixty men. All of them were whiteskinned and darkeyed, like the lovers; and all of them, like the lovers, were naked. These were the one who had come before, the men whom O and Boy never knew or had never even heard about, their witnesses and peers, the attendants and guests of honour at this ceremony, this great labour of love; the ones we forgot to invite. (217)

These are men from the past; Londoners, some from centuries ago. They are the men who mapped the city street before Boy and O, their predecessors. Some of the faces reappear on different bodies:

...the nakedness of the limbs set off by the hairstyles and accessories of different centuries – a seventeenth-century betrothal ring in which two chased silver hands clasped a chipped and crowned garnet heart; a badly-hennaed auburn wig, burnt by the curling tongs; a regulation moustache clipped by a Forces barber. (218)

These are the gay men whose stories were seldom if ever told: the soldier, the husband from the footnotes of history, amazed to see the two handsome men making love without inhibitions. Some of the men kneel by the bed like attendants at an adoration, one of them holding his hands out, palms-up: 'open-mouthed with delight at the beauty of what he saw, was lit gently from below by the single candle that O had placed in a saucer by the bed to light the scene.' (218) Robert L. Caserio suggests that the text combines 'allegory, romance quest, and pastoral idyll...as if Bartlett intends his novel to simulate a text from the Renaissance or the ancient world.'³⁰³ This comment echoes the use of intertextuality in Mr. Clive and Mr. Page.

Bartlett is juxtaposing religious and gay images to create a tender scene, potent with history. When Boy and O finally fall asleep, the crowd does not leave. Instead the men stay watching over them, as guardian angels and only when the sky begins to lighten do they slowly start to drift away. The image of 'a silent crowd of fifty or sixty smiling, naked men, pressed close together, fifty or sixty of them together in a single council flat bedroom.' (219) is both comical and poignant. The angels from the past have chosen the tiny flat as the place on earth to visit. They have understood the historical importance of the lives of Boy and O in this great city, that they have survived, that they are still here.

³⁰³ Robert L. Caserio, 'Queer Fiction' A Concise Companion to Contemporary British Fiction ed. James F. English (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006) 219.

Ready to Catch Him Should He Fall is a camp celebration of gay history, foregrounding the lives of working class men on the margins of city. Here, behind an unmarked door, they find a family that will sustain them through ‘the plague years in Thatcher’s London.’³⁰⁴

³⁰⁴ Neil Bartlett, Solo Voices (London: Oberon, 2005) 9.

Skin Lane

The Narrator of Who Was That Man? leaves behind the small town where he grew up, in search of the city which offers new possibilities of liberation. Boy's experience in Ready to Catch Him further underlines the excitement of queer urban culture.

Matt Cook writes of the often perceived link between gay men and cities, citing examples as diverse as ancient Athens, Renaissance Florence and Pedro Almodovar's Madrid.³⁰⁵ However, he warns that the city is not always a liberating space and men's experiences vary according to age, class, race and place.

Mr Clive and Mr Page are good examples of this. In his Mayfair home, Clive enjoys privacy and a certain amount of freedom. Page's Clapham flat offers him none of this. With the telephone out in the hall and Mrs Welch in the flat below, he has to be careful. In fifties Britain he is under constant threat of arrest.

Matt Houlbrook argues that, while the metropolis has provided a space for men to explore and organize their desires, nevertheless:

Men cried in the city. Men were afraid, lonely, guilty and isolated. Men were arrested and imprisoned, attacked and blackmailed. Men took their own lives in the city. Queer lives were braced by these common and contradictory experiences, taking shape within

³⁰⁵ Matt Cook, London and the Culture of Homosexuality (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) 2.

a persistent tension between pleasure and danger. Those very spaces that offered sanctuary to some men at certain moments excluded other men at other times.³⁰⁶

Skin Lane's Mr F certainly feels excluded. A solitary man of routine, he has never invited anyone to share his single bed. His isolated life has always been lived 'more or less to one side of everybody else's'. (43) When his sleep suddenly starts to be invaded by the disturbing dream of a naked boy's corpse, he has no idea where it has come from. The dreams begin on New Year's Day, 1967. Through the long, hot summer when MPs debate the laws on homosexuality, Mr F battles with his fear and guilt. He is forced to face his demons on the very day that homosexuality is decriminalised. Not that he is at all aware of what is happening in Westminster. The stories he reads every day in The Standard seem to be about other men, not him.

The novel is punctuated by references to the tale of Beauty and the Beast, a story which has obsessed Mr F from his youth. As a child, he identifies with Beauty, waiting for 'the first sound of snuffling in the dark'. (6) Through his adult fear and self-loathing, he begins to imagine himself as the Beast, with hot, animal urges which he nightly tries to scrub away with carbolic soap in his spartan bathroom. Like the Beast he is vulnerable, but he sees Beauty as his potential downfall. He doesn't remember that in the story it is Beauty who has the power to *save* the Beast.

³⁰⁶ Matt Houlbrook Queer London (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2005) 265.

Fairytales offer the reader a magical door through which to step into a different world. In a recent interview in The Independent, Neil Bartlett refers to Hesse's Steppenwolf, where a young man is walking down an alleyway when he sees a door in the wall:

He knows that if he goes through that door there's going to be another world on the other side of it. Part of every gay man's story is that moment where you ask yourself where your world is, where you fit in. And then you go through that door and you discover another world. You enter a world in which you can finally become your own man.³⁰⁷

Skin Lane is the story of a man who is unable to make that step. Though he is living in London in 1967, he is distanced from the political changes that are slowly beginning. Oblivious to the Summer of Love, he is scared to step out of his protective, contained routine: '...this was a man who definitely kept, you would have said, himself to himself.' (41)

Seemingly out of the blue the dreams start. Mr F has a recurring vision of the naked body of a young man in his bathroom and the scene is repeated, night after night: '... - as if he'd stayed in his seat at the end of the programme at the Odeon and watched the film all over again.' (18) They always begin with Mr. F walking slowly up the stairs to his flat and they are described in cinematic terms, such as; '...this shot is a close-up of his feet...' (19) and 'Then there is a long sequence...' (19). Mr F seems to be watching himself over his own shoulder, with no control over events.

The action is described in the present tense, which creates an atmosphere of immediacy and expectation, a new experience for a man who has lived so much in the past. The close-up

³⁰⁷ Paul Burston, "Neil Bartlett: I got you under my skin," The Independent (11 Mar.2007).

detail is exhilarating, but frightening, with red lighting casting a macabre mood as: 'The bars of scarlet light slide across his shoulder, down his arm and across the white skin on the wrist of his outstretched right hand;' (19)

Mr F observes himself walking upstairs, into the bathroom: '... and all of this Mr F watches (over his own shoulder, as it were, and as if the film had the sound turned off) with some dread, because he knows by now what is going to happen when this is all over.' (19-20) The tension builds until the climax of the journey, when he opens the bathroom door to see:

A man's body.

Naked.

A man's body, hanging upside-down, with the torso twisted across the seat of the lavatory, twisted sideways so that the head is tipped back over the rim of the bath and the hair and both arms are hanging down into the bathtub and the hands are lying palm up, lifeless and defenceless, right there on the chilly, medical-looking white enamel: the hanging, lifeless, naked body of a white-skinned, black-haired, athletically well-built young man. (21)

Mr F experiences a mixture of fear and arousal, staring, open-eyed at the cold, yet beautiful visitor. He is aware that '...there are now two men – two men's bodies – in the confined space of Mr. F's bathroom...' (21), an idea that he finds particularly alarming. He tries to look in the mirror, but his gaze is fixed on the body and '...he can't seem to take his eyes off it.' (21)

Laura Mulvey offers an insight into Mr F's experiences, when she cites scopophilia (pleasure in looking) as one of the enjoyments offered by cinema. Mr F is gazing at the body, projecting his desires onto the object. However, the weight of all the hanging flesh up so

close is too much and he stumbles backwards towards the door, desperate to get out of the room which is symbolizing his desires. He can't admit that the emotions are his and wonders 'what the camera is looking for as it scrutinises his face and body like this...' (20) as if the camera is the instigator of the action rather than him. He does not want to take responsibility for the arrival of the dream body in his bathroom and doesn't recognize that the desires have come from within himself.

He tries to explain his dream in two ways, firstly that a stranger, some unexpected guest, has arrived and stayed on too long. But, he asks himself, '...what sort of a desperate story would a filthy stranger like that have had to tell in order to talk his way into Mr F's private bathroom? It was ridiculous.' (27) The emotions here are of distaste at something dirty insinuating itself into his life.

Secondly, he describes the intruder through imagery of the Thames, which seems more precise and vivid to him, a memory of something he saw once down on the river:

A great bulk of timber, a great sodden log as thick as a telegraph pole and six feet long, had suddenly broken the surface of the water trapped in the dock at Queenhithe. For a moment, because of its size and shape, he had thought it was something truly dreadful bobbing and rolling there in the oily water, something rotten and stinking that the rivermen would have to come and drag out with their boathooks. Even when he had realised it was just a piece of wood, it still seemed terrible; dangerous, somehow, as if it had lurched up out of the stinking Thames looking for something to smash into. Why had it stayed hidden for so long? What had dislodged it from its filthy bed? Where had it come from? (27)

That is the question Mr F asks of the boy in his bathroom, the morning after he has woken screaming in the night: ‘Where have you come from?’ (27) The image of the log, that looks for all the world like a floating body, is a metaphor for Mr F’s current situation. Thoughts that have been submerged for years are suddenly breaking the surface, insinuating themselves into his sleeping hours and disturbing the calm exterior of his days.

Freud stated that, “The interpretation of dreams is the royal road to a knowledge of the unconscious activities of the mind.”³⁰⁸ At this point in his life Mr F’s dreams are starting to allow his desires to have a voice. He is dreaming in both senses of the word – seeing pictures while he is asleep and making wishes for his future.

Mr F has grown up suppressing his emotions. His father never recovered from the loss of his wife, a mother who died before Mr F was able to have any memories of her. His father’s refusal to speak of her, or keep photographs only compounded the boy’s sense of isolation. While he idolized his two elder brothers, both had left home by the time Mr F was ten. By the age of sixteen he was running the house and earning a wage, but: ‘no one had ever taught him how to feel. Indeed, the only real lesson his father had ever taught him was that feelings should never be spoken of;’ (46) The boy became increasingly withdrawn.

³⁰⁸ Sigmund Freud, “The Interpretation of Dreams,” 1899. Trans. James Strachey. (Harmondsworth: Penguin , 1976).

For all of Mr F's life, all male homosexual acts short of buggery whether in public or private have been illegal and have carried sentences of up to two years in prison. The prison sentence for buggery during Mr F's entire lifetime has been between ten years and life in prison.³⁰⁹

The order and anonymity of wartime army life suited Mr F and on his return he fitted back into his previous uneventful existence, living through his late twenties and early thirties against the backdrop of a post-war Britain that reinforced the stiff upper lip values he had been taught as a child. In mainstream culture at this time there was a reassertion of heterosexuality and the sanctity of marriage. Jeffrey Weeks observes that after the end of the war: the family was reaffirmed as the privileged site of sexual normality.³¹⁰ In the 1950s, the divide between heterosexual and homosexual was more sharply defined in public discourse and, as Weeks states: 'Homosexuality became the explicit Other, whose shameful existence reinforced the accepted norms, and strengthened the heterosexual assumption.'³¹¹ Theories of homosexuality as a sickness abounded.³¹²

So, when Mr F starts to dream about gazing at a young man's body, he tells himself that this is '...just his body flushing something out of his system. He was sure that was normal.' (24) His imagery is of cleansing a 'normal' body through expelling an unnatural infection. Though Wolfenden presaged changes, Cook argues that, in the 1960s: 'many reformers were

³⁰⁹ Jeffrey Weeks, Coming Out (London: Quartet, 1990) 14.

³¹⁰ Jeffrey Weeks, The World We Have Won (Oxford: Routledge, 2007) 47.

³¹¹ Jeffrey Weeks, The World We Have Won (Oxford: Routledge, 2007) 47.

³¹² Jeffrey Weeks quotes Gordon Westwood, who writes in Society and the Homosexual (London, 1952) that 'homosexuality is a 'disease' and a 'severe mental sickness.' Jeffrey Weeks, Coming Out (London: Quartet, 1990) 157.

ironically using the same language of illness, sin and despair as those opposing legal change.’

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The Rev. Timothy Beaumont, future president of the Albany Trust (the charitable and counselling wing of the HLRS), reported that ‘God has called homosexuals among others to chastity and to use their energies in other channels...’³¹⁴ The first time the dream happens, Mr F is very worried about the noise he makes screaming. He is frightened that the neighbours may have heard him: ‘It wasn’t like him. He wouldn’t want anyone to think he had been...’ (23)

After the dream has come for the fourth night, he decides that the next day ‘...he’d try scrubbing the bath out with bleach before he went to bed.’ (25) He feels that the place where the body has been in his dream is unclean, like his thoughts. Mr F’s actions are reminiscent of those of a child washing out its mouth after swearing. The next night he lies straight to protect himself from the dream, like he was told to as a child, ‘...lying on his back with his feet together and his arms straight down by his sides.’ (26) This was an instruction given to prevent him touching his own body – a forbidden act.

On waking from the dream Mr F is worried whether the neighbours have heard him making ‘that peculiar noise.’ (23) He shows an awareness of the restrictions and is scared that others will find out the truth about him and label him.

313 Matt Cook, A Gay History of Britain (Oxford:Greenwood World, 2007) 175.

³¹⁴ Jeffrey Weeks, Coming Out: Homosexual Politics in Britain from the Nineteenth Century to the Present. Revised Ed. (London: Quartet, 1990) 170.

Mr F is unable to work out why these dreams first started on 1st January 1967, for there have been no real changes in his life and: ‘... from where he was standing, there was nothing very different about the first days of 1967 as compared to the last days of 1966;’ (25) Ironically, he seems oblivious to the fact that January 1967 is the start of the year in which the Sexual Offences Act will become law, an act which will decriminalize sex between two men over the age of 21 in private. Mr F, however, is unaware that the changing climate might be relevant to him in any way. The Narrator comments on the importance of the “Summer of Love”:

...everyone in London must have known that this was one of those years when nothing was ever going to be the same again. But Mr F, carrying his copy of the *Standard* home on the 5.49 train, doesn’t know that; he doesn’t know that any more than he knows that it is going to be an exceptionally hot summer this year. He reads his newspaper every day, as most people do, but, like most people, he thinks the things described there are happening in somebody else’s world, not his; (49)

With fears compounded by living through the 1950s ‘gay purge’, Mr F is reluctant even to look at another man on his morning train journey from Peckham Rye to London Bridge: ‘And even if his face was only inches from that of his neighbour, he would never look at them. Certainly not in the eye.’ (12) He avoids becoming part of the main flow of the crowd on London Bridge, crossing on the western, upper side rather than the eastern pavement.

Mr F feels he has to be secret about all parts of his life, even his job, what he does and where. If someone asks him: ‘Mr F would evasively answer that he worked “over in the City”.’ (36) He has to be secretive because he is a furrier and his business is ‘...the slicing and stretching of skin;’ (31) Though he has never encountered human skin up close, he spends every

working day close to animal skin and is an expert at its manipulation and cutting. He doesn't admit to this because '... to describe too accurately what he actually did every day would seem grotesque. There was too much skin and hair involved...' (36) When Mr F arrives home each evening, he scrubs his hands religiously, over and over: '... he wants to get rid of the faint but distinctive smell that clings to them. It isn't a particularly unpleasant smell, but it is unusual; dusty, pervasive, oddly animal – hard to place until you realise what it is.' (30) He wants to deny that animal smell and the beast-like side of his feelings.

He works for M. Scheiner Ltd, a manufacturing furrier in a warren of narrow lanes on the north bank of the Thames. Close to such officially important sites as London Bridge and St Paul's Cathedral, but light years away from them too, it '...rejoices in the slightly sinister name of Skin Lane.' (31) The seven adjacent streets that house the fur trade are '...an entire and self-contained world...' (31) with every stage of the business represented, from the arrival of the stinking skins to the finishing stitches on a beautiful silk-lined garment fit for a princess. In this undercover world: '... a skin could complete its complex journey from broker to dresser to dyer to furrier to finisher – from beast to beauty – without ever leaving the confines of the parish.' (31)

The beastly secrets of the trade are kept hidden behind whitewashed windows for if the wearers of the finished garments were aware of exactly how their clothes were produced they might not part with their money. The beauty at the end of the process and the blood at the beginning are incompatible in the retail trade. As in all good fairytales, the details of the transformation 'from beast to beauty' (10) are shrouded in secrecy:

Nothing hinted at what was, by common consent, best kept hidden. The stench of the pelts when they arrived, stiff and greasy, skin out; their raw sensuality as they hung in glistening rows at auction; their unnerving softness as they submitted to the knives and needles – all that was kept out of sight, down on the Lane. (36)

In the retail section of the business, things are different. The huge plate-glass windows of the stores in Bond Street and Wigmore Street encourage consumers to look, to stand, stare and desire. The West End shopper is allowed to linger over and crave these luxurious garments.

The fur trade and its environs are employed as a metaphor for life as a gay man of Mr F's generation, born in 1920 and illegal right up until his late forties. Yet again, Bartlett sets his story in a secret, hidden part of the city, one that develops the idea of a past that can be stepped in and out of, as suggested in Who Was That Man? On turning down Garlick Hill, the visitor has '... a strong sense of stepping down into an older, darker – a *separate* – part of the world.' (33) The cobbled streets feel different underfoot, evoking an awareness of all the lives that have been lived there.

Jeanette Winterson describes how she uses Spitalfields in a similar way as a setting for The Power Book:

'...that's a place where there is layer upon layer of life from Roman Britain, through Elizabethan times, the Georgian period, into the life of the fruit and veg market of the twentieth century, and now into a whole different world where it's part of the city, where it's about money. And all of these things coexist. It's not that one takes over from the other. It's rather that one is superimposed on the other and the other can be uncovered at any point.'³¹⁵

³¹⁵ Margaret Reynolds and Jonathan Noakes, Jeanette Winterson: The Essential Guide (London: Vintage, 2003) 20.

When Mr F goes through the door of Scheiner's, he enters: '...a warren, cobbled together out of several even older premises' (34) Bartlett refers to the way in which history in the city is layered, when the Narrator describes the building that replaced Scheiner's, with its flight of eight stone steps up to the door: 'The bottom four of these seem to be of a much older and darker stone; I assume they must be survivors from the original building.' (33)

The Skin Lane area is also used by Alan Hollinghurst in The Swimming Pool Library as a metaphor for the hidden history of the city, a place containing secrets. Sixteen years after Mr F's curious summer, Hollinghurst's protagonist, Will Beckwith, visits Skinners Lane, in the narrow streets off Huggin Hill. The buildings are described as 'eighteenth or seventeenth century,' but the streets are 'medieval, and sloping quite steeply towards the Thames',³¹⁶

The manufacturing side of the fur trade has changed little over the years and Scheiner's business is in: '...one of the rare parts of the city that the Blitz left almost untouched.' (33) When Mr F goes to work he steps back in time to one of the oldest parts of London. In his work, as well as his private life he is living in the past.

The neighbourhood has retained the same smell for years and even still uses its 'own arcane vocabulary'. (31) Strange words that no customer would understand are used in workshops and telephone conversations: 'strange talk of things being *dropped*, *drummed*, and *pointed*; of

³¹⁶ Alan Hollinghurst, The Swimming Pool Library (London: Vintage, 1998) 70.

something (a skin; a person – a cheque?) being *fleshed*, and *faced*, and *stayed*.’ (31) In Skin Lane the furriers need to hide the details of their trade from the public but their code is just one of many. As Bartlett points out in Who Was That Man?, ‘At times we have talked in languages that no-one else could understand.’³¹⁷ He is referring to Polari, a coded language used by gay men in the city when speaking in code was a necessity, or simply to ‘zhoosh up’³¹⁸ a conversation. There are many reasons for secret codes in the city.

The secret world of the fur trade is only minutes away from important official sites such as St Paul’s Cathedral and Mansion House, but its unofficial world is a secret one. Bartlett’s Narrator, also speaking in code, comments: ‘This shouldn’t really surprise you, though – in London, it’s all a question of whether you turn right, or left, isn’t it?’ (32) There is a sense in the final imperative that he is sharing a secret with the reader, that the twenty-first century reader will understand his references. The secret sites in the city sit side by side with the official. Even the guidebooks that direct the tourist to the ‘Hidden Worlds of London’ (32) have only heard of a small number. The Narrator comments that these sites are never fixed: ‘...they appear, flourish, and then mysteriously remove, only to reappear elsewhere.’ (32)

In a recent interview in The Independent on Sunday, Bartlett refers to Vauxhall as ‘an entire new nocturnal world and geography’³¹⁹ created over the past five years. He observes: ‘It’s

³¹⁷ Neil Bartlett, Who Was That Man? (London: Serpent’s Tail, 1988) 80.

³¹⁸ Neil Bartlett, Who Was That Man? (London: Serpent’s Tail, 1988) 82.

³¹⁹ Paul Burston, Neil Bartlett: I got you under my skin,” Independent on Sunday (26 Apr. 2007). <<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/neil-bartlett-i-got-you-under-my-skin-439798.html>>

hard-wired into our culture as gay men, that we have an alternative map of the world in our heads.³²⁰

Like the Narrator in Ready to Catch Him Should He Fall, Skin Lane's storyteller holds out a photograph for the reader to 'see'. Like the door of The Bar, which has no name or number, Scheiner's door is unnumbered and has '...no brass name plate to announce either the name or nature of the business.' (33) The Narrator continues:

Looking at that door, at the top of its flight of dark steps, I get the distinct impression that, as with certain other highly specialised businesses that the City still considers are best conducted well out of sight, it was expected that anyone who needed to seek out the services on offer on the Lane would already be in the trade; in the know. If they were a customer, they would certainly have been given directions – if not a personal recommendation.

I'm sure you know the sort of thing. (34)

There is a reference to prostitution, here, an even older highly specialised business rooted in the city. In The Swimming Pool Library, a resident of The Lane, Charles Nantwich, recalls: 'In the old days it was known as Gropecunt Lane, where the lightermen and what-have-you used to come up for the whores.'³²¹ The access to the premises through personal recommendation only references the directions given in code to new visitors to The Bar in Ready to Catch Him Should He Fall:

...first there is a wedding, and then there's a death, and there's the news, and then there's us; meaning first there's the shop with the flowers, the real ones, and next door to that is the undertaker's with the fake flowers in the window, china, all dusty; and

³²⁰Paul Burston, Neil Bartlett: I got you under my skin," Independent on Sunday (26 Apr.2007).<<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/neil-bartlett-i-got-you-under-my-skin-439798.html>>

³²¹ Alan Hollinghurst, The Swimming Pool Library (London: Vintage, 1998) 73.

then the newsagent's and magazine shop, and then right next door to that is The Bar. You can't miss it.'³²²

The secretive fur trade is an appropriate occupation for a reserved man such as Mr F. He is an expert at his job and highly regarded by his employers. He has worked for the company for thirty-three years, yet still retains a formal relationship with his colleagues, and has nobody there he could call a friend. Some of the workers wonder about him, and the Narrator observes:

‘As was only natural, there was some speculation about him.

About his single-ness, I mean. (41)

The use of ‘natural’ suggests the view, vigorously promoted by the government and media in the 1950s and still widely-held in the 1960s, of what is ‘normal’ for a man of Mr F’s age. At forty-seven, he is not married with a family and people wonder if there is anything ‘wrong’ with him.

Mr F’s detachment extends to most parts of his life. If he has to stand in a crowded train carriage, he is ‘expert at avoiding contact.’ (12). His thick coat and suit mean that he will only ever feel a ‘general pressure’ from another body. (12) So, when the dream suddenly arrives he has no experience to help him unravel it for he has never been in a position where he is up close to a human body and able to stare. He is worried that, even in his fantasies, it is not allowed.

³²² Neil Bartlett, Ready to Catch Him Should He Fall (London: Serpent’s Tail, 1990) 16-17.

When he does leave his flat on his days off, Mr F prefers to visit the calm order of the large London galleries and museums. He is particularly drawn to them, however, because: ‘...it was considered perfectly normal to stand and stare at things you didn’t really understand, and to be alone while you tried to work them out.’ (50) The National Gallery, with its ‘high’ art, is one place where looking is officially sanctioned and: ‘He especially liked the fact that you knew no one was ever going to speak to you – that you could be quite sure there’d be no one there who knew you.’ (68)

On a visit in early 1967, however, he is disturbed to find himself in a room full of pictures of naked bodies:

Which meant that whichever way Mr F turned and looked, he found himself doing in public the thing which up until now he’d only ever done at home in private, sitting in his chair with his eyes closed and the cup of tea going cold at his elbow. And right out in public, too – right in the middle of the room. Staring at a body. (71)

This is ‘high’ art, not pornography, so different rules apply and he is allowed to look. Yet in spite of this, Mr F’s inhibitions make him uneasy. He is particularly drawn to a depiction of Christ with St Thomas where Jesus is doing something that Mr F thinks is very strange:

He takes hold of St Thomas’s right hand by the wrist, quite firmly, and guides his hand so that the older man’s index finger is sticking right inside him, right deep inside the wound. (73)

Here is an example of Bartlett finding homoerotic resonances amongst religious iconography, destabilizing the sanctioned, ‘high’ art.

A man in the gallery approaches him and comments on the picture they are both looking at. The man is 'standing much too close' (73) and holding a pair of yellow gloves. Mr F is not completely sure if his initial remark is addressed to him, since the man is not looking at him but at the picture, so it is ambiguous. In the past he would have ignored him but now, so as not to be rude, Mr F replies and the man takes this as a signal to continue the conversation:

‘Such a marvellous sense of how tangible things are. I mean you can really see that finger sliding in, can’t you?’

The man gestured towards the painting, waving at it with the hand holding the pair of spectacles.

‘And the way He’s guiding his hand like that. The contact. Marvellous. Quite marvellous. (74)

It is unclear whether Mr F is aware at all of the man’s motives. It is likely he would not allow himself the thought that someone was trying to pick him up in such an elevated place as the National Gallery. However, he does admit to himself that the image is marvellous and wonders ‘how it would feel to do that’ (75)

The experience in the gallery stays with Mr F - with the painting that seemed to be waiting for him and the sight of the man staring at it so openly and: ‘Whatever the reason, Mr F now began to keep a close but discreet eye on all the parts of men’s bodies that their clothes left visible on his way to and from work every day. To put it bluntly, he too began to *stare*’. (75)

The dreams start just before the arrival of Scheiner's nephew to learn the fur trade at his uncle's company. Although he doesn't yet realise it, Mr F's prince has arrived. The beautiful dark-eyed boy is sixteen and just at the point of becoming a young man: 'With a trace of fine dark hair just becoming a regular feature on his perfect top lip, and his broken voice already well settled, this smartly dressed young man is as dangerous a creature as he looks.' (92)

The girls in the machine room call him 'Mr Schein' – a reference to an Andrews Sisters' song. The nickname doesn't exactly translate, so the Narrator explains: 'I suppose it more or less meant he was Mr Handsome, "Mr Beautiful", The Beauty. Or just *Beauty*, really. That's what I'm going to call him, anyway. The name fitted the boy like a glove, and oh, did he know it.' (94) This description links to the start of the novel, which opens with an extract from the fairytale Beauty and the Beast that Mr F loved to have read to him as a boy. The novel parallels this tale, and the fairytale form is appropriate for Mr F's story since, as Marina Warner states: 'Fairy tale as a form deals with limits, and limits often set by fear.'³²³

In the picture that Mr F remembers from childhood: '...the Beast is a small and oddly wounded-looking creature;' (5) displaying vulnerability rather than aggression. Every night, after hearing the story, the child goes through a deliberate routine:

First, he pulls down the eiderdown; then he unbuttons the top two buttons of his pyjama jacket, uncovering his chest to the air. Next, he twists his whole body slightly to one side, rearranging his legs and arms under the covers so that he is now lying just as

³²³ Marina Warner, From the Beast to the Blonde (London: Chatto and Windus, 1994) 276.

Beauty is lying in the picture – eyes closed, breast exposed, head thrown back to one side, luxuriant black ringlets spread across the pillow. (6)

The boy is Beauty, waiting for the first animal smells in the dark, for the beast's breath on his neck. Alan Sinfield's description of The Bar in Ready to Catch Him Should He Fall, explains Bartlett's method here. Sinfield argues that: 'Bartlett is appealing to two distinct, though related, traditions: one founded in gender and desire-to-be, the other in sexuality and desire-for.'³²⁴

Now, at 47, Mr F is dreaming of being visited by the beautiful youth. The man who cuts and stretches the skins of beasts throughout the day is spending his nights looking at the skin of Beauty. He wonders if he has become the Beast. Everything around him seems to be telling him his behaviour is unnatural. As a child, he was warned to sleep with his hands by his sides, a warning not to touch whatever is 'on the other side of a high, forbidding wall.' (47)

Blood, a key motif in fairytales, is a recurrent image throughout the novel. Despite his trade, Mr F has a fear of blood. Freudian critic/writer on fairytale, Bruno Bettelheim, links this to a fear of puberty and loss of virginity, in his work on Sleeping Beauty. As the girl reaches adolescence, he writes, she explores previously hidden areas of existence and enters a chamber where an old woman is spinning. The girl pricks her finger on the needle, symbolizing the shift from one stage of her life to another. Bettelheim argues:

Any transition from one stage of development to the next is fraught with dangers; those of puberty are symbolized by the shedding of blood on touching the distaff. A natural reaction to the threat of having to grow up is to withdraw from a world and life which

³²⁴ Alan Sinfield, "The Challenge of Transgender, the Moment of Stonewall and Neil Bartlett" GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies (10.2 .2004) 267-272

impose such difficulties. Narcissistic withdrawal is a tempting reaction to the stresses of adolescence, but, the story warns, it leads to a dangerous, deathlike existence when it is embraced as an escape from the vagaries of life. (234)

These Freudian concepts can be applied to Mr. F's situation. He appears to be experiencing just such a narcissistic withdrawal, but at the age of 47. Bettelheim's warnings of the dangerous, deathlike experience that it leads to sounds like a description of Mr F's emotional life and his deliberate distancing of himself from close human contact.

Fairytale imagery permeates nearly every part of Mr F's life. His flat is on the top floor and every night, on the landing, he has to pass a small stained glass window, the central panel of which is surrounded by strips of bright red glass. As the sun goes down the strips create: '...a lurid carmine frame, a bloody, disembodied trap-door, right across the shabbily carpeted turn of the landing.' (15-16) The description of Mr F holding his breath, like a child, to avoid being stained by the red light each evening suggests a man who is unable to move beyond his adolescent fears. All of the imagery is of fairytales. Mr F is trying to avoid the bloody stain, a metaphor for the acceptance of his sexuality, while the trapdoor that leads from one world to another is a source of terror for him. He has to walk through that door in order to finally grow up, but he seems unable to take the first step.

An example of Mr F's inability to deal with his dreams in the light of day is apparent when he begins to be preoccupied with the idea of finding a face to fit the body in the dream. He begins a search for these features and even finds himself following a stranger in the street,

something he would never have done in the past. He notices the man because he is walking against the crowd, 'the wrong way', a little like Mr F himself, but particularly because he is the only man in the crowd whose face he cannot see. He can eliminate all the others, but this man *could* possess the face that is missing from his dream. At this early stage in the novel there is a clue that it might be within himself that Mr F will find the answers he so desperately searches for.

He follows the man off the straight roads and through the 'labyrinth-like lanes of the northern city' (113). He knows he wants to catch up with him and look at him, but he is frightened of confronting him on the street, in public. He feels he must 'Get somewhere where it's safe to look at him, but not be caught doing it.' (113) He believes that what he is doing is wrong. He may not be aware of the exact law on 'misdemeanours', that he could be imprisoned for up to two years for importuning, but his fear of being caught is strong nonetheless.

Mr F loses the man in Leadenhall Market, though in his frenzy of fear and obsession he is not immediately aware of where he is. As he stands, breathless and sweating amongst the workers shouting orders to each other, he notices that most of their aprons are stained with blood –a reference to the fairytale themes of loss of virginity and rites of passage. He turns on his heels, however, when he comes face to face with: '...rows and rows of carcasses hanging by their feet from metal hooks...' (115) It is as if the dream is chasing him into the daylight world, no longer contained in the darkness.

Mr F's most important working collaboration with Beauty is on a red fox fur coat and the boy is watching him cut out the collar. As Mr F slices the pelt, he has a sudden mental image of the 'taut white skin of the man in his dream' (125) and for the first time in his career, the blade jumps and he cuts the stretched skin between his thumb and forefinger. The wound begins to bleed and 'the first three drops of Mr F's blood soak slowly into the pelt.' (125) This is his first blood and the number three is always magical in fairytales:

...this anonymous fur collar.....will be the very first work from their two shared hands. Hidden away inside it, unbeknownst to the customer, these three drops of Mr F's blood will always be there – like a pledge signed in blood in some old story. (127)

It is after this symbolic moment that Mr. F is able to give an identity to the body in the bathroom. After an hour in bed, the blood is seeping out of his bandage: and in an image symbolizing loss of virginity he thinks: 'He wouldn't be at all surprised if the sheets were spotted in the morning.' (130) He wakes in the night to find his right arm and wrist aching and, disgusted with himself, is violently sick. But the following morning he knows who the body is: 'It was him. It was Beauty in the dream.' (144)

The middle of the novel is a direct parallel with the middle pages of *Beauty and the Beast*, the version that was read to the Narrator. Like the Beast, who ignores his beautiful garden while pining for Beauty, Mr F completely disregards the South London spring of 1967. The city is coming to life and everywhere the blood quickens, but Mr F keeps his head down, not even

smelling the flowers. The Beast is just longing for news of his love. Mr F is just waiting for the night when the beautiful visitor will return to his dreams: 'The sights and sounds of the spring are wasted on him; he lives only in his mind.' (149) The Narrator observes:

My point is that the little boy should have been encouraged to pay more attention to this passage. At least then when he grew up he would have had something to help him recognize his symptoms. (149)

The novel follows the summer's progress of the Sexual Offences Bill into law. Beauty arrives in April, when Leo Abse's Bill is passed through the committee stage, offering hope that the draconian laws on homosexuality are about to change. The red fox coat is being made during the long, hot summer when the changes are being debated.

The coat is the last project Beauty will work on with Mr F, before he is taken off the cutting benches and moved to the office with his uncle, to learn how to manage the business, which could one day be his. Mr F wants to prolong this last time together, so keeps rejecting the Russian fox skins that come into Scheiner's on approval. It is unclear how long he thinks he can draw out this process:

Did Mr F really know what he was doing, do you think, dragging out the business of choosing the skins like this? I'm sure he'd never read or even heard of the names *Penelope* or *Scheherazade*, but it was certainly their old trick that he was up to. (201)

Scheherazade told stories to delay her death and Mr F is spinning out the time until he loses Beauty. The same trick is also being used just up river in the House of Commons.

On 3rd July the Bill passed its third reading by 99 votes to 14, but only after an all night sitting, as Barbara Castle recalls in her diaries:

Monday, 3 July 1967

All-night sitting on the Sexual Offences Bill. It was a good job I stayed, tired as I was. At one stage we only carried the closure by three votes.³²⁵

But Mr. F is not aware that the date is historic. He is fantasising about what he believes are forbidden desires without realising that the House of Commons is debating that very subject. When he reads in the paper that the house hadn't risen until nearly half past six in the morning, he muses:

He always loved the sensation of stepping out onto an empty pavement first thing on a summer morning, before it got too hot. Before London got really going, and the streets were still cool and quiet. Before all the voices started. Before you realised that nothing was ever going to change. (205)

In a brief aside, the Narrator mentions that on 27th July that year Mr F decided not to open his copy of The Standard on the way home. A reader unpicking the codes will realize that if he had he might have read that the Sexual Offences Bill had been given royal assent and passed into law. Despite its shortcomings, the Act decriminalized male homosexual activities in private for adults over the age of twenty-one.³²⁶

³²⁵ "Sexual Offences Act 1967," The Knitting Circle:Law, (7 June 2007).

<<http://www.knittingcircle.org.uk/sexualoffencesact67.html> >

³²⁶ Jeffrey Weeks, Coming Out (London:Quartet, 1990) 176.

It is hot in London on the night of Thursday 27th -and the heat compounds Mr F's frustration at the almost disabling desire that he feels for Beauty, a desire that he thinks can never be acted upon. Curiously for him, he decides to sit and write down his feelings in the form of a letter to Beauty. Maybe, like Mr. Page, he is using writing as a form of therapy, committing his feelings to paper in order to get them out in the open. This is progress for Mr F, although he admits he will not send the letter. The scene is ambiguous, because he is facing his fears yet still under the shadow of the times when sending a love letter to another man could have led to his imprisonment.³²⁷ However, it is on the night of 27th July that Beauty comes to rescue him and set him free. In a parallel with the scene at the start of the novel, where the child waits to be rescued, Mr F is visited by Beauty again.

In the very early hours of 28th July, the body in the bath comes to life in Mr F's dream. The eyes fly open and stare at him and Beauty releases his own feet from the rope, prompting Mr F to assume that he must have been one of the beautiful high wire walkers he had watched as a child at Battersea Park Circus.

The whole sequence is described as part of an elaborate fairy tale with the dream-Beauty walking towards Mr F: '...like the Prince at the Ballet when he greets his guests in the royal ballroom...' (229) It is as if the beautiful boy has come to tell Mr F he need not be frightened of his feelings any more. His kiss, when it comes, has all the power of a fairytale breaking of

³²⁷ Dudley Cave describes the real fear in the 1950s of police finding any evidence of homosexuality: 'We thought we were all going to be arrested and there was going to be a big swoop. The newspapers were full of it. I got so frightened that I burnt all my love letters from Hughie.' The Hall Carpenter Archives, Gay Men's Oral History Group, Walking After Midnight, Gay Men's Life Stories (London:Routledge, 1989) 52.

a spell: ‘...he gently guided Mr F’s face towards his own, and, with a strange, sweet solemnity, did what Mr F had so longed for him to do back there in the workroom; he kissed him.’(230) The use of ‘solemnity’ suggests something official and symbolic.

In his study of The Sleeping Beauty, Bruno Bettelheim writes: ‘Only relating positively to the other ‘awakens’ us from the danger of sleeping away our life. The kiss of the prince breaks the spell of narcissism.’³²⁸ If this were to be applied to Mr F’s story, then it would seem that the night of 27th July would be the beginning of a new life for him.

The kiss is ambiguous, however, for the Narrator worries about how strong Mr F is: ‘Isn’t that what we believe, that we do always somehow find the strength? That the path will lead out of the forest; that the riddle will be solved; that the child never dies,’ he asks. (231) The Narrator seems to be warning against fairytale endings, against believing that biographies can ever be ‘complete’.

The fairytale genre is also used to question traditional gender stereotyping throughout the novel. The opening of the tale presents Mr F as the little boy who sees himself in the role of Beauty, waiting for the Beast to come to her at night:

Next, he twists his whole body slightly to one side , rearranging his legs and arms under the covers so that he is now lying just a beauty is lying in the picture – eyes closed, breast exposed, head thrown back to one side, luxuriant black ringlets spread across the pillow. (6)

³²⁸ Bruno Bettelheim, The Uses of Enchantment (London: Penguin, 1991) 234.

Later, paralleling the central section of the fairytale, There are images of him as the vulnerable Beast in his summer garden, who ‘lifts his muzzle to the air’ (149) to try to catch the scent of Beauty. He is also depicted ‘panting like some foul-breathed animal’ in the darkness. (136) Yet, at the climax of the novel when he really allows himself to look at Beauty’s face, he is looking at himself. He is both Beauty and Beast.

The fur trade itself underlines the rigid gender stereotyping of the time, when:

Men brought their women to be dressed in fur because they thought it was right and proper; they thought it bestowed on a woman all the qualities she should have – elegance; obviousness; animal heat. It put all her secrets right where they needed them to be – on the outside. (38)

The passage implies that men are encouraged to look at women; it is ‘right and proper.’ Mr F however, just wants to look at Beauty, but that, he feels, is forbidden. The workings of the trade, in the auction houses and workshops reinforce this, as: ‘Everything in the trade was sexed; even the skins themselves were sorted into male and female before going to auction, and priced accordingly...’ (38) The memory of hearing the words ‘male’ and ‘female’ shouted out across the auction house floor for the first time is something Mr F cannot forget. It implies a division that is problematic for him. There are strict rules as to who wears the finished garments, too:

... it was always men who paid for the finished furs – but it was only ever women who wore them. Somehow, the unspoken rules and principles of sexual division clung to the garments as insidiously as their faint but unmistakeable smell... (38)

The image of Beauty wearing the fur coat disrupts the accepted narrative and the unspoken regulations. He allows Mr F to take the coat off the dummy, and holds it open for him to try ‘as if it was the most obvious and natural thing in the world.’ (213) The use of the word ‘natural’ suggests that Mr F’s action here is in fact ‘unnatural’, calling into question the very use of such a term. When he sees himself in the mirror, the boy is ‘impressed’(214) by how extraordinary he looks and it seems that Mr F might even touch Beauty’s hair and kiss his neck, something he is aching to do and something that would be perfectly acceptable if he were a man buying a fur for his woman. As he holds the boy’s gaze he fantasises that nothing is stopping him, but he remembers the unspoken rules and stops himself following his desires.

Finally, however, it seems that Mr F might at last be able to fulfil his dreams, ironically when Beauty makes his girlfriend Christine pregnant. The boy does not go to his father or uncle, but to Mr F, telling him *he* will have to sort it out: ‘Otherwise, I tell my uncle about you. About the way you look at me. And you lose your job.’ (263) The fear that Mr F experiences at this threat highlights the absurdity of the fact that the Labouchère Amendment of the Criminal Law Amendment Act 1885 is still in force in 1967 London. The cruel amendment, known as the ‘Blackmailers’ Charter’, made *all* homosexual acts, whether in public or private, illegal.³²⁹ This included ‘attempts to procure the commission....of an act of gross indecency.’³³⁰ Mr F could quite easily have been blackmailed out of his job.

³²⁹ Jeffrey Weeks,Coming Out (London: Quartet, 1990) 14.

³³⁰ Jeffrey Weeks,Coming Out (London: Quartet, 1990) 14.

Mr F is stunned and Beauty, mistaking this for a refusal to comply, tells him: 'If you do it you can have me.' (265) When Beauty asks: 'You do want me?' Mr F replies 'I do.' (265) Sounding like a bridegroom, he is making a solemn oath, the significance of which is lost on the boy.

The night of their tryst is full of the imagery of magic and parallels the ending of the fairytale, where the Beast is saved by Beauty's pity. Beauty enters the cutting room, where Mr F knows they will not be disturbed, close to midnight and 'Straightaway, there was something in the room that the boy hadn't prepared himself for: feeling.' (291)

Beast-like, Mr F cuts the clothing from Beauty, with all the expertise of someone who understands how garments are stitched, never even grazing him, until he finally looks upon the body that he has been dreaming of.

But he is unable to put the knife down and touch the boy:

At this point you or I might have said – or cried out – the words we'd learnt from one of the stories; *If you had never woken me, I could have slept for ever* – or, *If you had not come to torment me, this would never have needed to happen...*; even, *If you had not been so beautiful, I would never have needed to punish you like this* – But Mr F said none of these things.' (299)

At the point in the fairytale when Beauty asks him if he is afraid, the Beast traditionally replies with a roar that will '...echo down the corridors of the castle and shake its foot-thick

walls with fury...' (300) Instead, the Beast speaks with the voice of a child when he answers 'Yes.' (300)

Beauty responds to the Beast's distress and '...of all the things he could be, he is gentle with him. Mr F tries to tell him that 'No one has ever...' (301) but the words won't come. As he screams and waves the blade in the air he is Beast again: 'a red-tongued panther; a stuck boar; a maddened, blinded bear.' (301) But as he gets close to Beauty's face, it's fairytale mask seems to crack open and he recognises it:

Oh you poor boy, Mr F murmurs; then, letting the knife fall away, but still gazing at the boy's moonlit face, *Oh*, he begins to sob; *oh, you poor boy. You poor, beautiful thing* - and then, with his other hand (the words still tumbling out between his sobs) he reaches out and runs his fingers - gently; so gently, as if touching the breast of a frightened bird - first through the boy's dark hair, and then across his face.

It is himself, you see, that Mr F thinks he is seeing; his own face at sixteen.

That is why he is crying. (302)

At sixteen, Mr F never experienced the excitement of the spring; like the Beast unaware of the beauty around him in his garden. Beauty is grasping the first excitement of youth, sex, spring and a whole life ahead. Mr F never had this. He is weeping for his lost adolescence.

At the end of the night, after Beauty has left, Mr F leaves Skin Lane with its memories, burning. London absorbs Mr F and his story, and the Narrator observes:

Still, that's what happens, isn't it; their strange and lurid stories flare up briefly as you hear them, but then, when they are gone, eventually, they are forgotten - and you

realise you never really knew anything about them except the story you were told.’
(333)

He is referring to the privileging of the ‘grand narratives’ of history that have pushed the stories of gay, working-class men into the margins of the city’s history.

The new London Bridge is used as a metaphor for life after The 1967 Act, with its new, wide pavements where there is ‘room for everyone’. However, the Narrator observes, ‘Of course, the water still heaves against the piers of the new bridge at the turn of the tide – but not quite so threateningly as people always say it used to.’ (334) The metaphor gives hope, but remains ambivalent, with the heaving water suggesting an undercurrent of prejudice and resistance to change.

Mr F is gone and has taken his secrets with him, but the Narrator still speculates about how he lived. Did he continue to buy The Standard and:

Do you think that if we went carefully back through the files for the next ten years we might even find his name *in* one of those stories – or his face, perhaps, caught by the cameras in the midst of a crowd on the Mall or in Trafalgar Square on one of those “historic” days when the *Standard* always tells you exactly how many thousands of people the police think turned up to cheer...’ (335)

These historic days are representative of history’s Grand Narrative, which presents ‘facts’ and statistics. Mr F’s story would not appear in any official historical records. His story is not celebrated by history.

At the close of the novel, the Narrator of Ready to Catch Him Should He Fall tells those who have been following their story that he is not able to present a final image of Boy and O, so instead he speaks of what he wishes would happen. Similarly, Skin Lane's Narrator directly addresses the reader with the words: 'I don't know about you, but this would be my only wish: that some several weeks or months or even years after that night.....this man will once again be disturbed by dreams.' (337) He is deferring to the reader, acknowledging their part in the creation of the story. The Narrator is unsure of Mr F's future though, using phrases such as 'Perhaps, of course, he'll be fine.' (337) He hopes Mr F's story will continue and that new dreams will return to disrupt his life again because: 'I suppose I just don't like to think (or believe) that once a man has acquired the gift of dreaming, he should (or even can) ever lose it.' (337)

Dreaming is not a curse, but a gift.

He wonders if: 'Perhaps I shouldn't worry too much about this one man amongst so many – a man who, even after all this, I still don't really know well.' (337) He should worry for there is a danger that men like Mr F will disappear into the crowd and their stories with them. The lives of working class gay men need to be documented, for it is through individual battles that history has been re-written. Jeffrey Weeks comments that all too often, historians fail to highlight '...the power of agency and of the macroscopic impact of subtle changes in individual lives that makes up the unfinished revolutions of our times.'³³¹

³³¹ Jeffrey Weeks, The World we have Won, (Oxford: Routledge, 2007) 7.

When the Narrator hopes that Mr F will have a special memory to look back on ‘...some sordid or marvellous meeting which I am too timid to imagine on his behalf,’ (337) he is resisting the role of omnipotent narrator and the authority of the single narrative voice. He doesn’t know. He leaves it to the reader to finish the story and this can be done in many different ways. As he says: ‘I can’t tell. It’s not the place of stories to tell you if dreams come true.’ (337) He is not telling a tradition

The importance of resisting closure and endings is highlighted by Jeanette Winterson, who argues:

There is always the danger of automatic writing. The danger of writing yourself towards an ending that need never be told. At a certain point the story gathers momentum. It convinces itself, and does its best to convince you, that the end in sight is the only possible outcome. There is a fatefulness and a loss of control that are somehow comforting. This was your script, but now it writes itself.³³²

On the final pages, Bartlett presents an assortment of fragments that are found in Mr F’s flat after his death. Unlike Mr Page, Mr F doesn’t leave a diary, but when he dies this collection is discovered in a box that belonged to him. The scraps appear to be rubbish; in fact they are key clues to the man’s life: a photo of workers outside a black door, tickets from the circus and a dog-eared book of fairytales. Also there is what appears to be a piece of newspaper used as a bookmark but on close inspection shows a woman snapped wearing a red fur coat outside a first-night at the Talk of the Town. This is the coat that Beauty wore for Mr F in the

³³² Jeanette Winterson, The PowerBook (London: Jonathan Cape, 2000) 53.

cutting room, the garment they collaborated on, the one with the collar containing three symbolic drops of Mr F's blood.

These fragments are similar to those in Boy's shoe box in Ready to Catch Him Should He Fall, or tucked between the leaves of Mr Page's journal. They represent the way that gay history has had to be re-appropriated, through collage, like stitching together a coat from so many different pieces of skin. As in Bartlett's previous three novels, these fragments, when pieced together, can offer the skeleton of a story.

With the collection is the letter that Mr F wrote to Beauty on the night of July 27, 1967, telling him of his dreams of leaning over him as he sleeps and looking at him for as long as he wants. The Narrator has the last word:

Some people of course may say that such dreams or convictions are hardly likely – but then, Mr F himself could hardly be said to be likely. In fact, a lot of people would say that a man like him should not, or could not, or most probably – and this is I think the worst thing of all – *did not* exist, but

But he did. And he did write that letter. How else are we to explain the fact that you are holding a copy of it in your hand?

Men like Mr F have been written out of history, their lives denied. Many people refused to think that this gay, working-class man could have existed or experienced such emotions. But he did. Here is the evidence. Bartlett is writing Mr F back into history, using a popular genre that will appear on bookshops' mainstream 'fiction' as well as its 'gay' shelves.

CHAPTER FOUR: ALAN HOLLINGHURST

The Swimming-Pool Library

The Line of Beauty

The Swimming Pool Library

The Line of Beauty

Introduction

Both The Swimming Pool Library and The Line of Beauty begin in the summer of 1983 and document a hedonistic time for two young gay men mapping their way around London.

Unlike Neil Bartlett's protagonists, Will Beckwith and Nick Guest are able to inhabit privileged parts of the city. Will, the son of a lord, enjoys privacy in a select flat in leafy Holland Park while Nick is the guest of a Tory MP's family in the prestigious Kensington Park Gardens.

Both young men are riding high in a London that offers sex and freedom. They are both privileged as part of the first generation to grow up in a society where homosexuality has been de-criminalised after the age of 21. They have never had to battle for their rights as gay men – all that has been done for them by a previous generation - and they rarely give them a second thought. They will never face the possibility of a jail sentence simply for expressing their sexuality – the fate of many gay men who lived before them. Just down from Oxford University to a city full of possibilities, Will and Nick are arrogant and often greedy. Kaye Mitchell argues that in both novels 'gay male sexuality is increasingly and obviously linked

to capitalism and sex.’³³³ This is apparent in Will’s consumerist approach to his sexual encounters and Nick’s relish in the materialistic opportunity promised by Thatcher’s Britain.

London, however, is about to change. Will is aware of a sense of unease, ‘something seen out of the corner of the eye.’ (5) For both young men 1983 will be their last carefree summer. The initial glitter of possibilities offered by the city will become brittle and harsh.

Reports from the United States Centre of Disease Control in 1981 stated that five young gay men had died in LA from a rare strain of pneumonia. The AIDS crisis was to dominate the 1980s, writes Jeffrey Weeks:

When it first appeared, at the start of the 1980s, it was widely seen as the disease of the already diseased, the result of sexual excess, the symbol of a sexual revolution that had gone too far. The confident gains of the 1970s for lesbian and gay visibility, space and rights, suffered a shuddering setback...³³⁴

Those who were suffering from the disease were often blamed as its cause, while the religious right used the emergence of AIDS to hark back to the links between homosexuality and disease that were rife in the 1950s. In the early summer of 1983, Will Beckwith is unaware of the implications of what is happening in America, yet he has a nagging sense of some unnamed threat hovering in the distance:

My life was in a strange way that summer, the last summer of its kind there was ever to be. I was riding high on sex and self-esteem – it was my time, my *belle époque* – but all the while with a faint flicker of calamity, like flames around a photograph.’ (3)

³³³ Kaye Mitchell, ‘Alan Hollinghurst and the Homosexual Identity.’ British Fiction Today ed. Rod Mengham & Philip Tew (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2006) 94.

³³⁴ Jeffrey Weeks, The World we have Won (Oxford: Routledge, 2007) 17.

Even the name of the latest aftershave to hit the gay community, 'Trouble for Men', hints at future disaster and the novel is permeated with references to its heady scent.

On 4th July 1982, Terence Higgins had become the first known person in Britain to die of an AIDS-related disease at St. Thomas's Hospital, London. Matt Cook writes that reaction from the health authorities and even the gay press was muted:

Despite the warning signs from the States, it was five months before the case was reported in *Capital Gay*.....At this stage though, there was little indication of the potential scale of the crisis. There was also a good deal of ignorance and denial.³³⁵

There was almost no response from the UK government until 1984, because the epidemic seemed, at first, to be confined to the gay community. Jeffrey Weeks describes the reaction from those in power as 'less than benign neglect'³³⁶ Unbeknownst to Will, he will soon no longer be able to take for granted a sense of control over his future.

Neil Bartlett's Ready to Catch Him Should He Fall ends with a tribute to all those who have died of AIDS. There is an image of a crowd, holding aloft lights to represent their lost friends and lovers:

...and from the great crowd comes rising the whispered chorus, a great, strong, slow, gentle sound, everyone now holding up a candle or just a hand or a photograph of a person who couldn't be here tonight...³³⁷

The scene is of a community learning from the past and looking to the future. Hollinghurst presents no such uplifting image of support, nor an optimistic view of the future. His world is colder. The common thread in The Swimming Pool Library and The Line of Beauty is that

³³⁵ Matt Cook, A Gay History of Britain (Oxford: Greenwood World, 2007) 196.

³³⁶ Jeffrey Weeks, The World we have Won (Oxford: Routledge, 2007) 17.

³³⁷ Neil Bartlett, Ready To Catch Him Should He Fall (London: Serpent's Tail, 1990) 312.

both young protagonists will have to come to terms with the fact that their sexuality has become a defining issue, without the support of any cohesive community.

The Swimming Pool Library

Will Beckwith slips effortlessly into London's wealthy Holland Park, via Winchester College and Oxford University. His class and wealth offer him a privileged view of the city. A discreet flat in one of the most exclusive areas in the city affords him privacy, while his leisure is ensured by a private income. All this comes courtesy of his grandfather, Lord Denis Beckwith, who has already settled his inheritance on Will. This is an inheritance built up during Lord Beckwith's time in government and the law. A former Director of Public Prosecutions, he was behind the 1950s purge on homosexuality, with its high-profile prosecutions of gay men. Ironically, it is this income that allows Will the freedom to experience his sex life in privacy.

Will was born just after the Wolfenden Committee reported and would have been a teenager post 1967 and the Sexual Offences Act, which began the partial decriminalisation of homosexuality. He is living at a time which privileges *young* men in gay culture. The 1980s explosion of the disco world, with gay London clubs such as 'Heaven' and 'Bang',³³⁸ is not as accessible to middle aged or elderly men as it is to the young. All of these advantages have afforded Will a freedom from the fears of arrest, imprisonment and public scandal that previous generations have faced, and have contributed to his arrogance, selfishness and intolerance of the old.

³³⁸ Matt Cook, A Gay History of Britain (Oxford: Greenwood World, 2007) 188.

Will has never felt the need to discover a gay history. He has not had to fight for his rights and shows no awareness of the men a generation before him who had to battle against persecution. 1983 is a time where it seems to Will that the battles have been won for gay men. Stonewall³³⁹ and the Gay Liberation Front have achieved a success that he takes for granted. In the 1970s he would have been too young to realise their importance. When his friend, James, is arrested by a 'pretty policeman' (222), Will observes that it 'gave me an urge to solidarity with my kind that I wasn't used to in our liberal times.' (223)

When he discovers the truth about his grandfather's part in the 'gay witch-hunt', Will shows his complete ignorance of the gay past with the following comment to his friend, James: '...there was a whole sort of gay pogrom, apparently...' (278) The addition of 'apparently' shows Will's genuine surprise that these events should be connected to his world.

Will's comfortable life is shaken after a chance meeting with Charles Nantwich, an ageing peer whose life he saves in a Kensington Gardens 'cottage'. Will is going to start learning a hidden history which will have implications for his life in 1983 and the years to follow, when he will have to start learning about the importance of community over the individual, as the impact of HIV and AIDS begins to be felt.

After the encounter in the park urinal, Will is offered the opportunity to write 83-year-old Lord Nantwich's memoirs. Will begins by dipping into Charles's archive, which includes

³³⁹ The Stonewall Riot happened after a police raid in 1969 on the Stonewall Inn, a gay venue in Christopher Street, New York. This was the first time gay people had openly fought back in this way against the authorities. The New York Gay Liberation Front was formed in the wake of this, with the Christopher Street Gay Pride March in New York in June 1970. The formation of the London Gay Liberation Front followed soon after. (See Jeffrey Weeks, Coming Out (1990) 188.)

much to parallel the experiences that are awaiting gay men throughout the 1980s, with its AIDS epidemic and the cruel and bigoted anti-gay backlash from the press and the religious right. Charles Nantwich was born in 1900, and since homosexuality was a criminal offence up until the 1967 Sexual Offences Act, he has had to shroud most of his adult sex life in secrecy. The Labouchère Amendment of The 1885 Criminal Law Amendment Act made all male homosexual acts *in public or private* illegal, with sentences for ‘gross indecency’ of up to two years, with or without hard labour. The Vagrancy Act of 1898 also stamped down on homosexual ‘soliciting’.

Charles’s privileged background did afford him a little more safety than many working-class men, who had nowhere to go, but his status ultimately could not protect him from the draconian laws. After the Second World War, the need for secrecy and coded living was heightened in an increasingly threatening climate for gay men. By the 1950s, a number of sociological studies and the popular press claimed that, as Matt Cook puts it, ‘queers were undermining the post-war social reconstruction, not least by turning their back on family life.’³⁴⁰

There were many high-profile court cases, such as that of the actor John Gielgud,³⁴¹ who was prosecuted for cottaging in Chelsea and, according to Jeffrey Weeks, ‘In the fifteen years following the outbreak of the Second World War, the number of indictable homosexual

³⁴⁰ Matt Cook, A Gay History of Britain (Oxford: Greenwood World, 2007) 167.

³⁴¹ Gielgud was prosecuted in 1953 for cottaging in Chelsea. (See Matt Cook, A Gay History of Britain (Oxford: Greenwood World, 2007) 168.

offences increased five-fold.’³⁴² As Charles discovers to his cost, ‘the fear of homosexuality ran like a thread through the decade.’³⁴³

There are clear parallels between Charles’s experience and that of gay men in the 1980s. Just as the ‘gay purge’ of the fifties was a reaction to the freedoms available during the Second World War, so AIDS emerged at a moment when the freedoms of the preceding decade were starting to be questioned by the ‘moral’ right. Margaret Thatcher’s concentration on ‘strengthening the traditional family’³⁴⁴, heterosexual, patriarchal and self-dependent, created a climate which nurtured anti-gay prejudice. Jeffrey Weeks Observes that AIDS emerged at a time ‘when the reaction against social liberalism was gathering force, when the tocsins were sounding for the sexual freedoms of the 1960s and 1970s, when the New Right were mixing a potent brew of religion and familialism...’³⁴⁵

Charles has had some experience of what Will’s generation is to face. Will would do well to read his diary of oppression and resistance carefully, as it documents the importance of support networks in the face of discrimination. Queer history is particularly important for Will in 1983, since there is even more need to assert the rights of the community. In the introduction to its collection of transcripts, the Gay Men’s Oral History Group writes:

³⁴² Jeffrey Weeks, Coming Out (London:Quartet, 1990) 158.

³⁴³ Jeffrey Weeks, The World we have Won (Oxford: Routledge, 2007) 21.

³⁴⁴ Margaret Thatcher, The Downing Street Years (London: Harper Collins, 1993) 628.

³⁴⁵ Jeffrey Weeks, “Post-modern AIDS?” Ecstatic Antibodies ed.Tessa Boffin and Sunil Gupta, (London: Rivers Oram, 1990) 133.

History can be a cohesive force. By looking back and seeing how other gay men have lived their lives, struggled and survived, we develop a shared sense of the past, a clearer understanding of the present, and an indication of the possibilities of the future.³⁴⁶

This is a point that Will has to learn. His encounter with Nantwich who, Will observes, has come into his life ‘up the back stairs’ (85), starts to open up hidden queer histories for Will and changes his perspective on the city.

Unlike Bartlett, however, who gives us Mr. Page writing his diary in the first person for a future reader to find, or the Narrator in Who Was That Man who speaks directly to the reader, Hollinghurst filters his collage through the rich and advantaged voice of Will. This voice begins by depicting Nantwich as a bumbling and confused relic of the past: ‘I saw he was dribbling gin from his glass onto the carpet. He touched my outstretched hand. “Whoopsy!” he said, as if I were being a nuisance.’ (36) However, when the reader begins to hear Charles’s own voice through his journals, his zest for life and his humanity become clearly apparent, especially when compared with Will’s obsessive and selfish sentimentality. David Alderson underlines this point when he comments that in Charles’s memoirs ‘he addresses the reader directly, and is lucid and self-reflexive – far more so than the self-deluding Beckwith.’³⁴⁷

Will himself describes how he uses his lover, Arthur, knowing that their relationship will not last: ‘I was certainly sentimental with Arthur, deeply sentimental and lightly brutal, at one

³⁴⁶ Hall Carpenter Archives, Gay Men’s Oral History Group, Walking After Midnight, Gay Men’s Life Stories (London: Routledge, 1990) 3.

³⁴⁷ David Alderson, “Desire as nostalgia: the novels of Alan Hollinghurst.” Territories of desire in queer culture: refiguring contemporary boundaries. David Alderson and Linda Anderson, ed. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000.) 33.

moment caressingly attentive, the next glutting him with sex, mindlessly – thoughtlessly.’(5)

As their relationship progresses, Will offers Arthur protection and somewhere to hide, but: ‘I saw him becoming more and more my slave and my toy, in a barely conscious abasement which excited me even as it pulled me down.’ (31) Will is exploiting his privileged position, as he does so often in his affairs with young boys.

For two years writing articles for the ‘Cubitt *Dictionary of Architecture*’(3), Will has lived a comfortable life: ‘I rang people up and there were parties from six to eight – which meant going on, and then some drunken supper and then, as often as not, Shaft...’ (4) He does not need the job, therefore doesn’t have to worry about any potential prejudice from employers. He can just walk out, which he does, when he gets bored with the regularity of office hours.

At the start of the novel, Will knows little of the city that he treats as his playground. He regularly frequents sites such as the Soho gay cinemas and the cottages, but he is not aware of their significance in his history. He thinks the cinemas are almost exclusively the playgrounds of his generation, and any older men frequenting them are described disparagingly. He patronizingly refers to a ‘spry little chap of sixty-five or so’ (51) seated in the front row like a schoolgirl innocently absorbed at a romantic ‘U’ certificate film: ‘A fiver from his pension, perhaps, and 30p for the humbugs, might be set aside weekly for this little outing. How he must look forward to it!’ (51) Will is not aware that, ironically, it is Charles and his elderly circle that are producing these films.

A man-about-town with a private income, Will feels he can control his part of the city – his comfortable home in Holland Park, from which he ventures out for adventures in Soho and

the West End. Certainly, he is able to control the young boys he brings home from Shaft Disco, who are always his social inferiors:

I took home boys from far out – from Leyton, Leytonstone, Dagenham, New Cross – who like me made their pilgrimage to this airless, electrifying cellar in the West End, but had no way, if they failed to score, at three or four a.m., of getting home. (192)

Will has his own flat, so he will always ‘score’ with these boys who are stranded in the city for the night. Emma Liggins points out that while Hollinghurst describes the excitement of the metropolitan world, the novel is ‘both promoting the pleasures of the gay scene and questioning the ethos behind it.’³⁴⁸ There is certainly a sense of the young boys as a commodity for Will.

With no job to hurry to, Will is at liberty to stroll in the park or the city streets during the day, ‘...beckoned on by having too much money’ (3) and possessing many of the qualities of the flâneur, described by Keith Tester as:

the sovereign spectator going about the city in order to find the things which will occupy his gaze and thus complete his otherwise incomplete identity; satisfy his otherwise dissatisfied existence; replace the sense of bereavement with a sense of life.³⁴⁹

Will does have a sense of dissatisfaction in his aimless days after leaving his job, yet he also has a ‘romance’ of himself that transforms the mundanities of every day and invests them with an importance and a ‘protective glow’. (5) He comments: ‘I was both of the world and beyond its power, like the pantomime character Wordsworth describes, with ‘invisible’ written on his chest.’(5)

³⁴⁸ Emma Liggins, “Alan Hollinghurst and Metropolitan Gay Identities” Posting the Male: masculinities in post-war contemporary British literature ed. Daniel Lea & Berthold Schoene (New York: Rodopi, 2003) 159.

³⁴⁹ Keith Tester, The Flâneur (Routledge: London, 1994) 7.

Keith Tester refers to ‘The protest of flânerie against the local clock of hours...’³⁵⁰ And, certainly, Will is not constrained by the working day. As he strolls out one evening, he notices: ‘The pavement and gardens were exuding their summer smells, and as I approached the Tube station I walked against the current of people coming home.’ (268) He is walking against the grain of the ‘normal’ regimented flow of the workday crowd.

Interestingly, Ross Chambers draws parallels between Will’s Flaneur-like meanderings around town and the novel’s structure which he refers to as ‘loiterature’:

Loiterature is a genre which, in opposition to dominant forms of narrative, relies on techniques of digression, interruption, deferral and episodicity...to make observations of modern life that are unsystematic, even disordered, and are usually oriented toward the everyday, the ordinary and the trivial (what is called ‘*flaneur* realism’).³⁵¹

The narrative certainly gives the appearance of wandering aimlessly at times, with Will following tenuous leads from a page in a journal or a backward glance from an attractive boy.

There seems to be very little pleasure or delight in strolling apparent in Will Beckwith’s wanderings. Will meanders to the ‘dismal Italianate garden at the head of the lake.’ The day is grey and Will is, as Keith Tester describes the flâneur, detached almost to the point of alienation. Will feels in control, yet somehow lacking fulfilment, too. He refers to ‘...the

³⁵⁰ Keith Tester, The Flâneur (Routledge: London, 1994) 15.

³⁵¹ Ross Chambers, “Messing around: gayness and loiterature in Alan Hollinghurst’s The Swimming Pool Library” Textuality and sexuality: Reading theories and practices ed. Judith Still, & Michael Worton (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993) 207.

sheer, crammed, single-minded repetition of my empty months;’(5) He resembles the poet who is ‘...set apart from the mass of the public...This poet, this man who is in control and who is yet dissatisfied.’³⁵² He has left his job and feels aimless and without direction. Will’s cold, detached narrative contrasts with the delight in strolling around the city that is so evident in Charles Nantwich’s diary of 1925:

All along by the Café Royal people were swarming around & there was a mood (which *was* quite oriental) of clamour & grime with underneath it a great passive summery calm. Life in England is so little of the streets that it was delicious to loiter. (152)

The novel opens on a journey home in the last tube train, with Will looking at a ‘severely handsome’ London Transport maintenance man, sitting opposite. Will marvels at the fact that the man is just starting his ‘lonely, invisible’ (1) work in an after-hours underground world, the world the commuters never see. Through a drunken haze, Will gazes at the workers and wonders at their ‘inverted lives’ (1). There is a sense of things unseen, of another world functioning below the surface of the city, hidden from the public gaze. Hollinghurst plays with the word ‘inverted’, evoking the use of ‘inversion’ by the medical profession in the past as a descriptor for homosexuality, and thus creating an analogy between the lives of gay men and the hidden world of the underground.

Will bemoans the fact that it is the Central Line that he uses most, describing it as ‘a great bleak drain’. He knows the line has its ghost stations somewhere, but: ‘...I had given up looking out for their unlit platforms and, perhaps, in a flash from the rails, the signboards and

³⁵² Keith Tester, The Flâneur (Routledge: London, 1994) 7.

good-humoured advertisements of an abandoned decade.' Will disregards their history and dismisses their potential stories, as he does much of the city's hidden, secret history.

At the start of the novel Will is following his regular map of London, travelling just a short distance on the Central Line every day: from his Holland Park flat to Tottenham Court Road and the Corry, Soho for Shaft Disco and the cinemas. He observes:

It was perhaps only of that very stretch of the Central Line which I always travelled that its fastidious rectilinearity gave a true picture: from Shepherds Bush to Liverpool Street the line had that Roman straightness which I so admired above ground. (46)

However, when he meets Charles, Will starts to journey further out, to St. Paul's for Charles's house then on to stations such as Bethnal Green and Mile End, where the track veers off to outlying stations to the north. He is widening his horizons and his route is no longer following the straight lines that he finds so safe.

Will is not, however, just travelling in space through his meeting with Nantwich. Through Charles's diaries he journeys to Africa of the 1920s and he also travels in time within his own city, visiting 1920s Soho, the cottages of the West End in wartime and Wormwood Scrubs in the fifties. These London excursions are 'underground' in two senses – to sites which would not have been mapped on any official tourist guide. This is an underworld that signifies suppression and secrecy. The tube is a key motif for the novel; since it is through a warren of underground sites that Will is to rediscover the London he thought he was master of and, through these sites, a hidden history.

While waiting for a train, Will wanders along to take a look at Harry Beck's famous London Underground map. He muses:

It was a clever piece of work, all the lines being made to run either up and down, from left to right, or at forty-five degrees, so that the whole thing became a set of dissolving and interpenetrating parallelograms. (46)

It is visually pleasing to Will, yet its straight lines don't present the whole picture. The map is an example of what cultural geographer Michel de Certeau has termed 'strategic mapping' referring to the attempts of modern city planners to impose order on the city. Frank Mort writes: 'Operating from on high, these techniques mobilise a panoptic vision of the city and its subjects.'³⁵³ The map bears no relation to the actual layout of the city, yet it influences the way the city is imagined as a whole. The straight lines and panoptical vision of the map levels out or ignores any twists and turns.

The Tube map distorts reality in order for it to conform to the prevailing hegemony. It is like grand narrative, which completely ignores the shape or detail of the city. In imposing its structure, it privileges the centre, making it larger and ignores the margins of the metropolis. The image of the map and its straight lines has parallels with the potential problems that can occur when attempting to assemble history. Mark Turner points out:

The difficulty in writing queer history (as with any history, in fact) is in getting the story down without levelling it out. How can we tell a story without unnecessarily negating other, linked stories that might also be told? Where are our priorities?³⁵⁴

³⁵³ Frank Mort, Sexual Geographies (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1999) 105.

³⁵⁴ Mark Turner, Backward Glances (London: Reaktion, 2003) 43.

The complexity of London is ironed out by Beck's map, just as queer culture is erased by conservative hegemony. However, Charles Nantwich's diaries will offer Will the chance to expand his knowledge of the different layers of the city space.

Will enjoys some of his time at the dictionary of architecture, since he is fascinated by the city's grand buildings. He is particularly interested in the Adams, Lord Burlington and Colen Campbell, exponents of the neo-classical tradition he so admires. When he leaves the job Will is hugely relieved to quit the stodgy office world (34), yet comments that the subject of the dictionary was important to him: '...the orders, the dome, the portico, the straight lines and the curved, which spoke to me, and meant more to me than they do to some.'(4)

The novel is full of buildings which hold secrets. The Brutus cinema in Soho, which specialises in gay pornography, is a part of secret London that seems to Will to be a metaphor for gay life: Official beauty above and unofficial delights below.

The Brutus Cinema occupied the basement of one of those Soho houses which, above ground-floor level, maintain their beautiful Caroline fenestration, and seemed a kind of emblem of gay life (the *piano nobile* elegant above the squalid, jolly *sous-sol*) in the far off spring of 1983. (48)

What is true of architecture is true of history, as often in Will's world the official hides, or suppresses, the unofficial. The image of the building squashing 'low culture' underground is an effective representation of the suppression of gay history. Ironically, the repression often serves to make what is out of bounds more attractive, as Charles Nantwich remembers:

‘It’s always gone on, of course, Charles recalled. ‘We had little private bars, sex clubs really, in Soho before the war, very secret. And my Uncle Edmund had fantastic tales of places and sort of gay societies in Regent’s Park – a century ago now, before Oscar Wilde and all that – with beautiful working boys dressed as girls and what-have-you. Uncle Ned was a character...’ Charles sat beaming.’ (247)

The front of the Brutus Cinema also a combination of the squalid and the classical:

One entered from the street by pushing back the dirty red curtain in the doorway beside an unlettered shop window, Painted over white but with a stencil of Michelangelo’s David stuck in the middle. (48)

Homoeroticism is found in ‘classical’ nudes. Like Will’s life, the shop-front is a mixture of high and low culture. He goes down the stairs ‘lit by one gloomy red-painted bulb’(49) to the half-light of the small cellar room where the marginalized is literally pushed underground.

Just as he regularly returns to the cinema’s dank delights, so Will is drawn to the excitement of the secret underworld of the Corinthian Club: ‘It was a place I loved, a gloomy and functional underworld full of life, purpose and sexuality.’(9) The Corry, on Great Russell Street, is over a hundred years old. A postcard dating from just after the war gives the description:

The Corinthian Club, London; The Swimming Baths (25 yards). Founded in 1864, the present fine building, housing a gymnasium, social rooms, and 200 bedrooms for young men, dates from 1935. (11)

The building is a masterpiece by the architect Frank Orme whom Will once met and saw as ‘a fraud and a hotchpotch’. (9) Will delights in these same qualities in Orme’s building, for it is not what it seems. Just below the grand edifice there is another hidden world:

As you walk along the pavement you look down through the railings into an area where steam issues from the ventilators and half-open top-lights of changing-rooms and kitchens; you hear the slam of large institutional cooking trays, the hiss of showers, the inane confidence of radio disc-jockeys.(9)

In the building’s hall, ‘the worlds of the hotel, above and club below, meet.’(9) Will observes: ‘I would always take the downward stair, its handrail tingling with static electricity, and turn along the underground corridor to the gym, the weights room and the dowdy magnificence of the pool.’ (9) This is sexual electricity; the downward stair leads to a place of fantasies for young and old and in Will’s world it is the only place where there’s a real celebration of gay life. He describes the regular excitement in the showers with an affectionately camp metaphor: ‘In a few seconds the hard-on might pass from one end of the room to the other with the foolish perfection of a Busby Berkeley routine.’ (26) This is a regular occurrence and part of the club’s rituals, a world where class distinctions are blurred:

This naked mingling, which formed a ritualistic heart to the life of the club, produced its own improper incitements to ideal liaisons, and polyandrous happenings which could not survive in the world of jackets and ties, cycle-clips and duffel-coats. And how difficult social distinctions are in the shower. (16)

When Will is in the middle of the suffocating affair with Arthur: ‘The Corry featured in these days as a lucid interlude – with an institutional structure that time in the flat entirely lacked.’

(31) This is a structure which reminds Will of the stability of school and its early experience of a gay community of which he felt a part. When Will first arrives in London, a slightly nervous newcomer to the city and still an undergraduate he finds friendship at the Corry: ‘A sweet, dull man smiled at me there on my first day, talked to me, showed me what was what.’ (10)

In the past ‘branched neo-classical lampadaries...’(11) threw a bright glare over the pool, but in Will’s time the lighting has been redesigned with shadows and a ‘suggestive gloom’ (12) which all add to its atmosphere of secrecy. Like the Brutus Cinema, the Corry’s ground level, with its busy entrance hall where people hurry to sign up for volleyball, is concealing the reality of the lower floors.

Hollinghurst references a scene from a film which has become part of gay mythology to convey the atmosphere of the Corry’s swimming pool:

It is the most subterranean zone of the Club, its high coffered ceiling supporting the floor of the gym above. Corinthian pillars at each corner are an allusion to ancient Rome, and you half expect to see the towel-girt figures of Charlton Heston and Tony Curtis in deep senatorial conspiracy. (11)

To those who recognise it, this image will evoke a scene originally cut due to its homoeroticism from the 1960 film Spartacus³⁵⁵. The Roman General, Crassus (Laurence Olivier), is in the bath with his body servant, Antoninus (Tony Curtis), who is washing him

³⁵⁵ Spartacus, dir. Stanley Kubrick, Universal, 1960. This was an important radical film, which helped to break the McCarthyite Hollywood blacklist. Producer Kirk Douglas deliberately employed blacklisted people, such as the writer, Dalton Trumbo, to work on it.

and there is an implicit sexual approach from the master to his servant. They have a discussion about the eating of oysters and of snails: ‘My taste includes both snails and oysters,’ says Crassus, and points out that taste is not the same as appetite and is therefore not a question of morals. When the scene was restored in 1991, it was found that the soundtrack had been lost. The master and his young, beautiful servant had been silenced.³⁵⁶

A scene which also blurs class boundaries is recorded in Charles’s Africa Diary of 1926. His beloved servant Taha is recovering from a scorpion bite and Charles is nursing him:

Taha slid his hand shyly across the blanket & clasped my own...I felt a squeezing in my chest & throat & hardly dared look at him as, all unconsciously, I made our two hands more comfortable together, interweaving his long fingers with my own. (211)

With Taha Charles feels ‘a complete freedom from self-consciousness’. (207) Their master and servant relationship presents a respect missing from any of Will’s liaisons.

Will’s first significant brush with the hidden history of previous generations of gay men comes when he visits Charles’ house for the first time. It is a building that evokes the past, set in part of London where, as Neil Bartlett points out in Skin Lane, layers of history are clearly apparent:

Though close to Canon Street, Upper Thames Street and the approach to Southwark Bridge, this little knot of side streets was very quiet. Drivers avoided the narrow gauge of its alleyways, and much of it seemed to have been given over to somnolent trades – a bespoke tailor, a watch repairer. (70)

³⁵⁶ The soundtrack of Spartacus for this scene was re-recorded, with Anthony Hopkins speaking Crassus’s lines for the late Olivier.

Already Will's curiosity is aroused and his interest in the history of this part of the city heightened. Always fascinated by architecture, Will gives a detailed description of the building, an elegant former merchant's house close to St Paul's Cathedral. The house, in Skinners Lane, near Huggin Hill, is an example of secret London, since it is apparently no longer officially marked in the A-Z and therefore is not pinned down to a single place or meaning.

Like Mr Page, in awe of 18 Brooke Street, Will gazes up at the building: '...surprisingly taken back, by its air of secrecy and exclusion, to the invalidish world of Edwardian ghost stories, to a world where people never went out.' (70) Will is not used to feeling excluded. It seems like a fairytale house, full of secrets and shadows.

Charles tells Will the story of his home, how it survived the blitz, though fell to ruin after it. He speaks, too, of the history of Skinners Lane: 'In the old days it was known as Gropecunt Lane, where the lightermen and what-have-you used to come up for the whores.' (73) The street had been one of many marginal sexual spaces in the city. The importance of oral history is underlined here. Just as the urinals were named 'Clarksons' or 'The Yorkshire Stingo', so the streets were known through a sexual slang, too.

Once inside, Will finds the house full to overflowing with books, paintings and photos, a collage of oils, water colours, portraits and drawings, many of beautiful young men. In the library:

The walls were white, and above the door a pink and grey pediment had been painted, perhaps a *trompe l'oeil* relief; within it classical figures posed, and it was almost with embarrassment that I noticed that exaggerated phalluses protruded in each case from toga and tunic.

'Funny little chaps, aren't they?' Said Charles... (72)

The figures are painted by Otto Henderson, an old friend of Charles's and apparently a contemporary of gay icon Jean Cocteau. Will later discovers Henderson in Charles's diaries, living a bohemian life in 1920s Soho.

Charles's house has much in common with the other public buildings in the novel, such as the Corry and the Brutus, which Will describes as emblems of gay life and where a secret world is hidden below ground level. The house lives up to its promise of secret stories as Charles leads Will down a narrow staircase between unplastered walls, snaking round a corner under a wooden lintel into 'a cool, mildewy darkness.' (79) To add to the gothic atmosphere, Charles is momentarily depicted as a horror-film villain, 'muttering gleeful asides while leading his victim into the trap.' (79) His glee turns to delight, as the subterranean vault is lit to reveal a secret Roman bath.

The bath is a significant part of the city's hidden gay history. Clues as to its importance are to be found, courtesy of Otto Henderson, around the walls:

The walls, which were plastered and painted cream, had a continuous frieze running round, which, being above head height, looked tastefully classical at a glance but, like the library over-door, were homosexual parodies when inspected close to. (80)

The most spectacular part of the underground chamber, however, is the mosaic depicting two Roman boys. Part of the picture is missing, so it is difficult to read the whole story.

Charles delights in the pool's secret history, explaining: 'This little bit of the baths is all that's left to show how all those lusty young Romans went leaping about. Imagine all those naked legionaries in here...' (80) The Roman mosaic is the central image of The Swimming Pool Library. The picture is not in a museum or any official collection of history. It is underground in the cellar of an old private house in a London street so disregarded that it is not even marked in the A to Z.

The mosaic is incomplete – only fragments remain and many of the coloured squares are missing. But the fragments are enough to begin assembling an unofficial history of the young lovers...

The mosaic is a metaphor for queer history, which has to be assembled and read through fragments and collage, through journals, photographs and snippets of old home movies. It is assembled, as Mark Turner states, to 'disrupt and disturb the ways we have come to understand the events and people of the past.'³⁵⁷ In the same way, Neil Bartlett assembles a collage of history in Who Was That Man?.

The pavement picture depicts the upper parts of two boys who look as if they are going swimming: '...the one in front turning to the one behind with open, choric mouth as they

³⁵⁷ Mark Turner, Backward Glances (London: Reaktion, 2003) 43.

dissolved into the nothingness beyond the broken edge of the pavement.’ (80) This is an image of innocence and eroticism which Will finds extremely moving. These are youths before the sexual encounter and even though their images are incomplete, they still appear vibrantly alive and full of expectation. This is reminiscent of his reaction to the beautiful boys on the screen at the Brutus. Though Will enjoys the later episodes in the films, it is the introductory scenes: ‘...buoyant with expectation, the men on the street or on the beach, killing time, pumping iron, still awaiting the transformation our fantasy would demand of them, that I found the most touching.’ (50) Will describes the mosaic’s poignant image:

The second young man, following closely behind, leaning forward as if he might indeed be wading through water, was in profile, and expressed nothing but attention to his fellow. What did he see there, I wondered – a mundane greeting or the ecstasy which I read into it? That it was merely a fragment compounded and rarefied its enigma. (81)

One of the boys has his mouth open in pleasure or, possibly, pain. Will observes: ‘It reminded me of the face of Eve expelled from Paradise in Masaccio’s fresco.’ (80) The mixture of homoeroticism and religious iconography, mixing ‘high’ art and ‘low’ culture, underlines the symbolism of the mosaic.

Mark Turner cites Walter Benjamin’s technique of amassing fragments in his Arcades Project as a way of articulating the assembling of queer history. This technique is ‘...an attempt to think about the fragments, rather than the unifying, overarching narratives of urban modernity.’³⁵⁸ The novel itself operates as a form of mosaic. Like the men in the mosaic on the floor of Charles’s pool, pieces of the picture are tantalisingly missing. Will gradually fills

³⁵⁸ Mark Turner, Backward Glances (London: Reaktion, 2003) 36.

in parts of the puzzle, though Charles holds onto the piece that will complete the picture until the end. The reader and Will have to put the pieces together.

Like Bartlett, Hollinghurst is concerned with the question of how gay history is written. It is often assembled from unofficial documents: diaries, letters, journals, pictures, notes or home movies. History can be discovered ‘between the lines’, often in code. The form employed in the novel is collage, or bricolage. Fragments of the past are presented in diary extracts, juxtaposed against old photographs, and snippets of film. These fragments are side by side with anecdotes which underline the importance of oral history. The term ‘bricolage’ is explained by Andy Medhurst to describe the reading of gay history:

Denied even the remotest possibility of supportive images of homosexuality within the dominant heterosexual culture, gay people have had to fashion what we could out of the imageries of dominance, to snatch illicit meanings from the fabric of normality...³⁵⁹

Significantly, it is at the point when Charles shows Will the incomplete picture that he asks him to write his life story. The ‘official’ account of Charles’s life, to be found in newspaper reports and court documents, is just part of the story. Nantwich wants Will to reclaim the rest of his life from the margins of history and complete the picture.

³⁵⁹ Andy Medhurst, “Batman, Deviance and Camp,” The Many Lives of the Batman: critical approaches to a superhero and his media ed. Roberta E. Pearson & William Uricchio (London: BFI, 1991) 153.

Mark Turner comments that ‘unconventional interpretative methods’ are needed to imagine history differently.³⁶⁰ He is describing an attempt to make sense of fragments of stories which on the surface seem incomprehensible. Juxtaposed against other fragments, however, they can create many alternative narratives.

Charles refers to dry accounts of life in the Sudan, ‘official histories’ that made him realise he didn’t want to write memoirs like that. He tells Will: ‘There is a book in my life, but it’s almost entirely to do with imagination and all that. The facts, my sweet William, are as nothing.’ (240) Charles understands that the imagination can often be far more valuable than ‘facts’ when interpreting the past. As if to illustrate this, he describes the night of his arrest through a series of dreams that he had in prison. When Will comments on Charles’s Africa diaries, he observes: ‘What I rather got the impression of is that you were lost in a dream. It’s very beautiful that feeling the diaries give of a constant kind of transport when you were in the Sudan. It’s like a life set to music.’ (240)

Eventually, Will understands that anything he could write would be less about Nantwich and more about the marginalizing of gay history. He tells Charles:

All I could write now,’ I said, ‘would be a book about why I couldn’t write the book.’ I shrugged. ‘I suppose there are enough unwritten books of that kind to make that of some interest. (281)

³⁶⁰ Mark Turner, Backward Glances (London: Reaktion, 2003) 49.

When Charles announces he has something to ask Will, he assumes that it will be some physical demand: ‘Would I let him take my clothes off, or kiss me?’ (81) Will has become so used to conducting relationships through sexual transactions that he can control, that he cannot comprehend that the old man would want anything else from him. Will’s friend James has noted in his own diary recently: ‘Will becoming more and more brutal...’ (5) In fact, what Charles asks is ‘Will you write about me?’ (81)

Charles is clever – he presents Will with avenues that he wants him to pursue, leading him on with snippets of information and clues for Will to follow. He sends him on a journey around London. Each site he points him to holds a clue which Will must pick up and try to crack, before following the next one. Like Nick Guest in The Line of Beauty, Will becomes an Alice in Wonderland-like creature – steered on to the next crazy link in the mosaic of Charles’s life, and of his own.

If Will were to research Charles’s life in ‘official, respectable’ historical sources, he may well find him mentioned in Hansard, Burke’s Peerage or referred to in court records or newspaper reports of the nineteen fifties. Charles’s archive, however, gives a fascinating example of how gay history is assembled. Will experiences a tangible sense of excitement as he tugs open the straps of the ancient briefcase and spills its contents onto the table. It is filled with fragments of the everyday lives of gay men in the first half of the twentieth century. The main part is a set of quarto notebooks, frayed and worn, with titles inked on the covers, such as ‘Oxford, 1920’ and ‘1924: Khartoum’.(95) On closer inspection, Will notices that ‘there were odd items tucked between the pages – postcards, letters, drawings, even hotel bills and visiting cards.’ (95)

In these apparently random fragments lie the clues to Charles's story. Will dips into them, rather than read them chronologically, letting his mind wander through the texts, from one trace of the past to another.

The diaries move from school memories of Winchester during the First World War, to Oxford and Africa in the twenties, then London in 1925, 1943 and 1954. These are secret, personal memoirs yet, like Bartlett's Mr. Page, Charles has composed them with a belief that they will have a future audience. Charles understands the importance of history told from 'below' that can disrupt the official grand narrative. Personal, biographical accounts can give a different picture to officially sanctioned historical texts.

Will draws up a chair to look through an envelope of photographs. He knows they will be enigmatic, but believes they will also provide: '...the keys or charms to open the whole case to me.' (95) Will soon discovers that the mosaic of Charles's life will not be so easy to piece together. Just as important as the diaries will be '...probing his memory for links and identifications...' (96) Will is learning that oral historical accounts are as important as written sources.

As he starts to put Nantwich's story together, Will becomes aware of significant parallels between their lives. Will has recently been considering himself very daring, sunbathing naked with his new boy, Phil, on the roof of the Queensberry Hotel. However, in Charles's diary of 9th June 1925, he describes a similar experience with his old friend Sandy Labouchiere in his Soho studio:

Beyond the studio you can climb out onto a roof where Sandy apparently sunbathes naked with his friends & where there is a fine view of the old Wren church with its bulbous spire.(149)

Sandy may be campily named after the infamous amendment to The 1885 Criminal Law Amendment Act, but he is enjoying wilfully flouting its regulations.

In an extract from a September 1943 journal, Charles refers to the often democratic experience of cottaging. In a visit to the Leicester Square urinals he spots some of the regulars: ‘...Major Sprague and that butler from Kensington Palace & a few anxious youngsters on the make.’ (229) This blurring of class boundaries is reminiscent of Will’s description of the range of professions at the Corry:

the bankers, the teachers, the journos, the advertising johnnies, the managers of hamburger outlets, the actors, the consultants, the dancers from West End musicals, the scaffolders, the rack-renters, queuing for the hair dryer and clouding the air with Trouble for Men... (223)

A range of cultures and classes appear to co-exist in this underground world in a way they do not in the world above. When Will reads Charles’s diaries of London in the Blitz, he discovers a similar blurring of class as well as spatial boundaries; and is genuinely surprised by Charles’s description of life in the city at this time:

Wartime London, which I had always imagined half bombed to bits, the rest of it keeping going on five-shilling dinners and a lot of selflessness and doing without, emerged quite differently in Charles’s journal. It appeared (and I suppose this was the other side of my apprehension about war) as an era of extraordinary opportunity, when all kinds of fantasy became suddenly possible, and when the fellow-feeling of allies and soldiers could be creamed off in sex and romance.’ (224)

In his autobiography The Naked Civil Servant, Quentin Crisp describes night-time London in 1940 as ‘...one of those dimly-lit parties that their hosts hope are slightly wicked.’³⁶¹ Normal rules were suspended in the black-out, with taxi-drivers offering cheap fares and policemen

³⁶¹ Quentin Crisp, The Naked Civil Servant (London:Fontana, 1977) 154.

allowing themselves ‘a certain skittishness’³⁶². Instead of arresting him on suspicion of importuning, they would be cheerful and often even friendly. Crisp describes voices whispering suggestively and hands reaching out from the darkness as he walked along the London streets and ‘...in dimly lit trains people carried on as they had once behaved only in taxis.’³⁶³

He recalls that the black-out even made romantic overtures possible:

Once, when I emerged from Leicester Square Underground station, the outline of the buildings on the opposite side of the road looked so unfamiliar that I thought I must have taken the wrong exit. When I asked an invisible passer-by where I was, he kissed me on the lips, told me I was in Newport Street and walked on.³⁶⁴

Nantwich’s journals show that, in spite of living in a time of repression and in fear of arrest, life could still be fun. According to Charles, it was much more fun for gay men than the 1980s:

Oh, it was unbelievably sexy – much more so than nowadays. I’m not against Gay Lib and all that, of course, William, but it has taken a lot of the fun out of it, a lot of the *frisson*. I think the 1880s must have been an ideal time....Even in the twenties and thirties, which were quite wild in their way, it was still kind of underground, we operated on a constantly shifting code... (247)

Will discovers from the journals that many of the sites he has seen as his were frequented by Charles and other gay men sixty years previously. Neil Bartlett underlines the point that men of differing generations share experiences and geographies of the city, when he states: ‘When people ask me why I live in London, I say, I’ve made a life for myself. But I haven’t invented

³⁶² Quentin Crisp, The Naked Civil Servant (London:Fontana, 1977) 154.

³⁶³ Quentin Crisp, The Naked Civil Servant (London:Fontana, 1977) 154.

³⁶⁴ Quentin Crisp, The Naked Civil Servant (London:Fontana, 1977) 154-5

a life; I have moved into, made a place for myself in a life that already existed. It's quite true. I am other people.'³⁶⁵

Photographs and films of the past are also central to the narrative. The gay Bond Street photographer Ronald Staines is introduced to Will at Charles's club. Staines is aware of the potential power of photographs and home movies in the re-creation of the past and its hidden stories that have hitherto been confined to the margins of history. He advises: 'Never destroy a photograph, William; it's a bit of life sealed in for ever.' (43)

Staines is a magpie, like Charles. In his house is a huge archive of photographs, representing the fragmented nature of gay history. When Will asks for old pictures of Charles, Staines leads him to rows of wide, shallow drawers in which 'hundreds and hundreds' of photos are stored. (160) Amongst the glamorous Mayfair figures of the forties, he finds an image of Charles at home. The archive is a mess, but it is the disorder that makes it exciting. Female society beauties nestle next to rent boys and market porters. Privilege is side-by-side with the 'ordinary'.

Walter Benjamin writes of unpacking his library, the books 'not yet touched by the mild boredom of order.'³⁶⁶ He describes the mood of sitting amongst the disordered crates – a mood of anticipation, the same emotion experienced by Will and Phil delving into the drawers 'like spoiled children.' (160) Will comments: 'There was something wanton about the way he let us rummage, and about the muddle of the system. I felt each picture encourage

³⁶⁵ Neil Bartlett, Who Was That Man? (London: Serpent's Tail, 1988) 205

³⁶⁶ Walter Benjamin, Illuminations (Glasgow: Fontana, 1979) 59.

a question, or hint at some urgent, tawdry secret.’ (160) Will and Phil are creating a collage, juxtaposing different prints side by side, then changing the order, creating a new story and new questions each time, re-writing history.

As well as his official Bond Street work, Staines also specialises in pictures of beautiful young men, evoking the image in Charles’s mosaic. His new exhibition ‘Martyrs’ mixes religious iconography and gay sexuality. St. Sebastian is ‘a boy of tedious, waxen beauty with a little loincloth about to tumble down.’ (230) The picture of John the Baptist features Aldo, a butcher Staines found while photographing studies of working people at Smithfield Market. Official Biblical stories are subverted with these beautiful working-class boys in the lead roles. Once again, the divine is found in the everyday.

Staines also has a fruitful line in homemade gay pornographic films and Will is invited to witness the final shoot of one with an Edwardian theme. Charles and many of the staff from his club, Wicks’s, are involved in the project, which will be distributed to the little basement cinemas in Soho where they have contacts – the same cinemas that Will regularly frequents. There is almost no part of Will’s underground life that isn’t Charles’s world too. Ironically, young gay men who often dismiss the old are regulars at porn cinemas showing films made by gay men often two generations older than them. When Will is in the Brutus Cinema, he considers the boys in the often dated porn films showing there:

Where did they get them from, I wondered, these boys more wonderful than almost everything one came across in real life? And I remembered reading somewhere that a Californian talent-spotter had photographic records of three thousand or more of them ranging back over twenty or thirty years and that a youngster, after a session in the

studio, mooching through the files, had found pictures of his own father, posed long before. (50)

Staines even discovers a brief home movie of Ronald Firbank, James's literary hero. Staines buys a 'whole lot of home movie stuff' at Christie's, 'And then in amongst it there was this fragment – quite exceptional...' (285) The viewing of the scrap of film is one of the most poignant moments in the novel and is another example of how even the smallest fragments of the past can be used to build a much bigger story.

Will looks at his own photo album and passes on some of his own history to his six-year-old nephew, Rupert. There are 'already period-looking' (59) pictures of Will and other boys at Winchester, including one of Will in the swimming team, sporting some particularly revealing trunks, copies of which had been ordered by many of the boys when it appeared on the school notice board. Will and 'Roops' have an open discussion about who is and isn't homosexual in the pictures. Rupert observes, sagely: 'Almost everyone is homosexual, aren't they? Boys, I mean.' (61) Even six-year-old Rupert is subverting society's assertion that almost everyone is heterosexual.

Throughout the novel, Will refers to his desire for straight lines – in memories of his grandfather's house at Marden. Yet, when he is walking in the park, he isn't thinking straight: 'Even among the straight lines of the park I wasn't thinking straight – all the time I looped back to Arthur.' (5) Even his thoughts are described in terms of wandering. Real beauty is to be found in loops and curves, rather than straight lines. It is on one of these 'loops' that he

wanders off the straight paths of the park and into a public lavatory, a cottage, ‘tucked into the ivy-covered, pine-darkened bank of the main road.’ (6) He is turning to leave when he spots an Arab boy: ‘I was convinced that he had noticed me.’ To see if the boy will follow, Will descends the tiled steps into an underground encounter that will lead to his first meeting with the enigmatic Charles Nantwich.

Will is already no stranger to parts of hidden London, cottages in Kensington and Victoria and the Soho underground gay cinemas and clubs, but what he doesn’t understand is how knowledge about their history can help him understand his own life. Nantwich opens up these sites to Will. Will’s circuits of clubs, cinemas and cottages are all linked to Nantwich. Will finds that there isn’t one part of his life where Charles hasn’t already been and this is so since Nantwich is used in the novel as an embodiment of gay history. Charles was in Africa, Suez, World War Two and London in the roaring twenties. Gay men were present at all these times and places, but erased from the official accounts. Up until now, Will hasn’t known this history existed, now he starts to understand its importance. As Will’s friend James comments: ‘One knows about the Second World War, one knows about Suez, I suppose, but what people were actually getting up to in those years...’ (279)

It is important that Will meets Nantwich in a cottage, since it is Charles who takes him further down into this liminal, public and private world and its secrets. When Will describes the ‘lonely middle-aged men’ who ‘over-frequented the lavatories’(6), it’s as if he’s talking about men who regularly meet on the morning or evening train and politely acknowledge each other:

Did they nod to one another, the old hands, as they took up their positions, day by day, alongside each other in whatever station in their underground cycle of conveniences they had reached? (6)

The cottages are described in the novel as being mapped, like the London Underground. The men follow circuits of cottages throughout the city. In fact, as Will discovers later, London's urinals are closely linked with its secret, queer history. Matt Houlbrook writes:

As they moved between London's urinals, men's experience thus generated finely calibrated cognitive maps, imaginary and habitual sexual geographies...Tom Driberg had his established circuit – from the Astoria, via urinals opposite the Garrick Club and by the Coliseum, finishing in 'Of Alley'. Some produced more formal guides, hand-drawn maps of the queer city. In 1928 Emlyn Williams heard of an antique dealer, nicknamed "Miss Footsore", who had mapped London's urinals, calling them "Comfort Stations of the Cross".³⁶⁷

This sexual mapping of the city had begun for gay men living many generations before Will, long before the summer of 1983. Will does not initially understand the historical significance of this alternative mapping of the city. Houlbrook adds that perhaps the first queer city guide –was published by Routledge in 1937: For Your Convenience: A Learned Dialogue Instructive to all Londoners and London Visitors. Written pseudonomously by the urban observer, Thomas Burke, it apparently innocently guided men to London's urinals, safe in the knowledge that gay readers would comprehend the code. In fact, 'London's urinals were revealed as potentially private sites for the enactment of queer desire. Burke even offers a

³⁶⁷ Matt Houlbrook, Queer London, Perils and Pleasures in the Sexual Metropolis, 1918-1957 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005) 51.

guided tour, starting from Ludgate Circus...and the tour is complemented by a hand-drawn map.³⁶⁸

Houlbrook asserts the importance of the urinal in the gay history of the city. For gay men who had no private residential space to take other men, or who were married, the public city had to provide moments of privacy in what he terms 'fissures within the urban landscape'.³⁶⁹ These 'stations' in the 'underground cycle' (6), followed by the men in the Kensington cottage, have been frequented by gay men for decades. They achieve secret urban identities with their own code names and 'urinal etiquette'.³⁷⁰

Charles Nantwich describes the 'famous' Dansey Place urinal, known as 'Clarkson's Cottage' which, according to Houlbrook, 'attracted patrons from across the world'.³⁷¹ In a visit to the cottage in 1943, Nantwich noted: 'There was a sort of businessman at one end in a raincoat & that thin, anxious little chap who's always there and keeps Cave at the other.' (228) His description illustrates how these men created traditions and codes which would have been known and followed, what Houlbrook describes as:

³⁶⁸ Matt Houlbrook, Queer London, Perils and Pleasures in the Sexual Metropolis, 1918-1957 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005) 51.

³⁶⁹ Matt Houlbrook, Queer London, Perils and Pleasures in the Sexual Metropolis, 1918-1957 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005) 49.

³⁷⁰ Matt Houlbrook, Queer London, Perils and Pleasures in the Sexual Metropolis, 1918-1957 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005) 50

³⁷¹ Matt Houlbrook, Queer London, Perils and Pleasures in the Sexual Metropolis, 1918-1957 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005) 65

networks of sites where the sexual possibilities were institutionalised, if precarious: London's public urinals. The urinals constructed in streets and stations by municipal authorities in the late nineteenth century were a liminal social space in which a unique interplay between public and private sustained complex opportunities for privacy and sexual encounter.³⁷²

These were important queer sites in a city where gay men could not openly express their sexuality. But they were more than that – they were part of a community, places with rules and rituals, where you could, as Charles observes, be ‘certain that there will be something for me there...’ (250) Like the bathhouses, class is not important for these are spaces which are primarily concerned with the body. Will sees the elderly men in the urinal as sad, yet when he later reads Charles's diary, he is presented with an exciting and jolly cottage culture. In his journal of 28th September, 1943, Nantwich describes the gents at Victoria Station where, he has been told, ‘you can have a wonderful whirl at Victoria these days with all the tommies and tars ...’ (229) The cottages allow the public to become private, albeit temporarily. They allow for a common culture for men who cannot experience their sexuality elsewhere.

When he enters the Kensington Park urinal, Will experiences a ‘faint revulsion’ (6) and ‘a fear of one day being like that.’ (6) He patronizingly describes the men's heads as ‘grey and loveless’, yet there is precious little love in his own life at this time. In fact, when old Charles totters in only to collapse with a heart attack, his head lolling at the side of a stall, most of the men stay to care for him. It is generally the older men who offer the few examples of a supportive community in the novel.

³⁷² Matt Houlbrook, Queer London, Perils and Pleasures in the Sexual Metropolis, 1918-1957 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005) 49.

The juxtaposition of official and unofficial history is apparent when Will goes to see Billy Budd³⁷³ at the Royal Opera House, with his grandfather. They watch from a box – a commanding view from above where they can watch the crowd in the opera house, as well as the stage. As an honorary director of Covent Garden, his grandfather seems to be able to survey the whole of the Opera House from this point. However, Will comments that this is not a good place from which to watch the production. The box is both private and public, since the eyes of the people in the stalls dwell on the boxes, so any chance of anonymity is lost. The box represents: ‘the penalties of exposure, discomfort and pitilessness which were paid for privilege.’ (119)

Will’s grandfather, Lord Denis Beckwith, is a representative figure like Charles. Beckwith’s world of the stately home with its straight avenues and walkways, the box at Covent Garden, the House of Lords and the Athenaeum Club in Pall Mall all epitomize the upper classes, the law and official history:

He had spent all his adult life in circles where good manners, lofty savoir-faire and plain callousness conspired to avoid any recognition that homosexuality even existed. The three of us in our hot little box were trapped with this intensely British problem: the opera that was, but wasn’t, gay, the two young gay friends on good behaviour, the mandarin patriarch giving nothing of his feelings away. (120)

³⁷³ Billy Budd, has been carefully chosen by Hollinghurst; given its gay “provenance” –book by Melville, libretto by Forster, music by Britten, performance by Pears – it is unsurprising that the opera has a powerful gay subtext.

The erasure of gay history is apparent to Will, who is starting to realise he has a gay heritage, when James spots Peter Pears³⁷⁴ in the stalls below. Most of the audience fail to recognize him; a few look uncomfortably away from his ‘stroke-slackened’ face. (122) Will, however, sees him as beautiful – an image that transforms the whole house. He witnesses ‘...the opera, whose ambiguity we had carped at take on a kind of heroic or historic character under the witness of one of its creators.’ (122) The use of ‘witness’ gives Pears’ appearance a religious feel, as if Pears has some revelation to impart to the audience – if only they will listen.

Will highlights the poignancy of the occasion for Pears. He is watching others perform on the same stage and in the same sets in which he performed years before, under the direction of Britten, the man he loved. However, there is a sense that Will is still only at the beginning of the education he is receiving at Charles’s hands when he comments:

I reacted to him as if he were himself an operatic character – just as I had entered with spurious, or purely aesthetic emotion into Charles Nantwich’s war-time adolescence...It was an irresistible elegiac need for the tenderness of an England long past. (122)

Then the lights go down and Lord Beckwith comments, curtly: ‘I don’t give him long,’ (122)

The passing of this generation risks the loss of its gay history.

It is to the insensitive Beckwith that Will owes his financial security. He cannot afford to cross him. Ross Chambers tellingly describes Will’s situation as ‘the realisation of the

³⁷⁴ Pears (the late Britten’s long-term artistic collaborator and lover), had sung Vere in the first performances of Billy Budd at the Royal Opera House in December 1951. The revival in 1979, referred to in the book, used the same design elements by John Piper.

parasite's complicity with the power that oppresses him.'³⁷⁵ Things that he has taken for granted Will now has to question. His whole way of life owes its existence to the wealth accrued by his grandfather, the former Director of Public Prosecutions who was responsible for the 1950s gay 'witch hunt'. Denis Beckwith was rewarded with a peerage for imprisoning gay men for such 'crimes' as 'soliciting' and 'conspiracy to commit an indecent act' (278) Nantwich describes him as: 'The one who more than anybody has been the inspiration of this 'purge'.' (260)

Charles Nantwich's experiences of gay life have involved a constant need for secrecy in the face of the threat of prison. The 'little clan' of half a dozen queens who form his close social circle in 1983 are all men who have cemented friendships in the past and who would have spent years living coded lives. It is these older men that seem to offer the only strong example of a supportive community within the novel.

To an extent Will finds some support at the Corry though, ironically, the only real example of someone there who 'befriended' him is Bill, an older man who has played a huge part in Nantwich's life.

An altruistic and humane man, keen to help those less fortunate, Nantwich builds relationships with working-class men that seem to be based on some sense of equality, as far as is possible. Charles's 'circle' generates a strong feeling of community because of the changes it has had to live through and the way it has had to fight for its basic freedoms. It is

³⁷⁵ Ross Chambers, "Messing around: gayness and loiterature in Alan Hollinghurst's *The Swimming Pool Library*" *Textuality and sexuality: Reading theories and practices* ed. Judith Still, & Michael Worton (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993) 216.

also fascinating because of its creativity, borne out of the above. Charles tells Will soon after they meet:

Actually, there are lots of people, not yet dead, that I'd like you to meet. All my society is pretty bloody interesting. Falling to bits, of course, ga-ga as often as not, and a coachload of absolute Mary-Anns, I won't deny it. But you young people know less and less of the old, they of you too, of course. I like young people around: you're a bonny lot, you're so heartless but you do me good. (41)

Jeffrey Weeks observes that: 'Oppression does...provide the conditions within which the oppressed can begin to develop their own consciousness and identity.'³⁷⁶ This development happens when Charles discovers the support of a gay community in prison in 1954/5. He writes: 'The place was fuller than it had ever been with our people, as a direct result of the current brutal purges.'

Will's lack of any sense of community is why the Corry is so important to him. Without a network of friends apart from James, it is a constant in his life. Will uses and often exploits his young men. Arthur and Phil often seem little more than commodities to him. He has power over them, financial and intellectual. James comments on 'how yet again he had picked on someone vastly poorer and dimmer than himself – younger too. I don't think he's ever made it with anyone with a degree. It's forever these raids on the inarticulate.' (218) Will chooses young men who seem innocent and child-like, yet, David Alderson observes:

³⁷⁶ Jeffrey Weeks, Coming Out (London: Quartet, 1990) 11.

‘At the same time, though, this lack of sophistication ascribed by Will to his lovers results in his explicitly snobbish contempt for them.’³⁷⁷

However, there is a sense of equality between Charles and the men he picks up, in spite of the fact that he is a Lord. He is gentle and considerate towards Roy Bartholomew, the GI he meets in Tottenham Court Road in 1943: ‘I must say he was absolute bliss, with that kind of innocence that so appeals to me, & very manly and friendly...’ (226) Charles’ relationship with his servant Taha shows a similar respect. When a senior prison officer asks him: ‘ “You have a servant, a houseboy. What is his name?” ’ Charles replies: “I have a companion. He is called Taha al-Azhari.”’ (257)

At the end of the novel, Will returns to the Corry. One of the final images is of a group of elderly gay men in the Corinthian Club’s swimming pool: ‘There were several old boys, one or two perhaps even of Charles’s age, and doubtless all with their own story, strange and yet oddly comparable, to tell.’ (288)

These men are no longer invisible to Will for he has started to become aware of the stories of gay men who have lived before him. It seems that perhaps his perspective on the city is shifting, but this is questionable. Through his discovery of a hidden London, Will has been given a glimpse of his position as a gay man within a context of gay history. He is compromised, however, because he has learnt that he is dependent upon the forces of repression. The only book that Will can write about Charles’s life will be the one about why

³⁷⁷ David Alderson, “Desire as nostalgia: the novels of Alan Hollinghurst” Territories of desire in queer culture: refiguring contemporary boundaries ed. David Alderson and Linda Anderson (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000) 32.

he can't write it. Perhaps the only way he can put Nantwich's voice back into history is to write it as fiction, telling the story of why he is silenced. In one sense, The Swimming Pool Library is that book.

The Line of Beauty

I wouldn't wish the eighties on anyone, it was the time when all that was rotten bubbled to the surface. If you were not at the receiving end of this mayhem, you could be unaware of it.

– Derek Jarman³⁷⁸

The Line of Beauty begins where The Swimming Pool Library ends. Will Beckwith's meeting with Charles Nantwich spans the early summer of 1983, the same summer that Nick Guest arrives in London, to stay at the home of Tory MP Gerald Fedden and his family.

For Will, the summer has been his 'belle epoque', for Nick it is the wonderful beginning of his first magical year in the city. For both it is a charmed time, but for both it will be the last of its kind, before the threat of AIDS will start to creep into the public consciousness, and with it the vicious backlash against the gay community by the tabloid press and the religious right.

The tabloid press and a number of Tory politicians blamed the AIDS epidemic on the country's lack of morals and accused lesbians and gay men of destroying 'the family'. MP Dr Rhodes Boyson observed in the Daily Express: 'The current fashion for the flouting and propagating of homosexuality and lesbianism is both anti-family and anti-life.'³⁷⁹

³⁷⁸ Derek Jarman, At Your Own Risk: A Saint's Testament (London:Vintage, 1993) 95.

³⁷⁹ Matt Cook, A Gay History of Britain (Oxford:Greenwood World, 2007) 204.

Nick Guest is writing a thesis on hidden sexuality in the work of Henry James, his hero, and a writer whose own sexuality was shrouded in secrecy and ambiguity. In the 1980s, Nick will discover the need for secrecy too, in the shadow of a Conservative government steeped in ‘family values’. With the election of Margaret Thatcher in 1979, a concerted effort to promote the ‘traditional’ began to negate the progress made by lesbians and gay men in the late 1960s and 1970s. Jeffrey Weeks describes the climate of the time:

From the late 1970s there was a distinct shift to the right in the political geography of Britain. From 1979 into the 1990s, Margaret Thatcher presided over an administration that was more sharply of the radical right than any previous administration.³⁸⁰

Emphasis was placed on the ‘traditional family’³⁸¹ a term which presupposed married, heterosexual couples, with parents together in the family home, as opposed to homosexual ‘pretended’ family relationships.³⁸² The disintegration of the traditional family, asserted Thatcher, was ‘...the common source of so much suffering.’³⁸³

When Neil Bartlett’s Narrator of Who Was That Man? describes coming to London for the first time in the early 1980s, he tells of moving into a community of gay men which already existed, a community that he later discovers has been a part of the city for many years. It is the support of this group which enables him to explore and map his way around the city and later strengthens him against the bitter climate of hatred and bigotry in response to AIDS.

³⁸⁰ Jeffrey Weeks, Coming Out (London: Quartet, 1990) 237.

³⁸¹ Margaret Thatcher, The Downing Street Years (London: Harper Collins, 1993) 629-630.

³⁸² Matt Cook, A Gay History of Britain (Oxford: Greenwood World, 2007) 205. This term was used in Clause 28, an addendum to the 1988 Local Government Act.

³⁸³ Margaret Thatcher, The Downing Street Years (London: Harper Collins, 1993) 630.

There is no evidence of such a community existing in Nick's world and he often has to find his way around the city on his own.

The Line of Beauty is set in a greedy, grasping London where Margaret Thatcher will announce, after her third election victory: '...and who is society? There is no such thing! There are individual men and women and there are families...' ³⁸⁴ It is a Thatcherite family, an embodiment of just such Conservative ideals, which opens its doors to Nick Guest in the summer of 1983. In his early twenties, Nick arrives in London from the small market town of Barwick. A state-school boy from a middle-class background, he has just gained a first from Oxford, where he has also met, fallen for and befriended relentlessly straight, public school-educated Toby Fedden. While he is a postgraduate at the University of London, Nick is to stay with Toby's family: his father, aristocratic and apparently liberal Tory M.P. Gerald, Toby's elegant and aristocratic mother, Rachel, and his emotionally fragile sister Catherine.

Nick feels that he is being welcomed into the Fedden family and is unaware of where their loyalties really lie – with the family as a self-sustaining dynasty. He is tolerated as a support for Catherine only as long as his sexuality is hidden. Nick is unaware of this and is simply filled with the sheer delight and excitement of coming to live in London. For him, the city is a promised land. London seems to offer excitement, sex and freedom to live a gay life,

³⁸⁴ Margaret Thatcher, "Interview for Women's Own Magazine ("no such thing as society") 31 Oct. 1987" Margaret Thatcher Foundation 24 June 2007
< <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/speeches/displaydocument.asp?docid=106689> >

something Nick could never experience in Barwick. In fact, he is ignorant of the world into which he has just arrived.

Nick is in love with the romance of the Fedden family, yet it is a selfish, intolerant institution which excludes anyone perceived as different. By the end of the novel, the Feddens come to embody anything but acceptance for Nick; they stand for the government's negative attitude towards homosexuality and AIDS, closing in on themselves to protect one another and reinforce a rigid class system. At first the family offers Nick entry into a hidden, privileged London, with its access to private houses and gardens, select dinner parties and soirées. He will discover, however, that as a gay man he will only be welcome there as long as he is celibate. Tim Edwards comments that this response is redolent of a widespread concern in the early 1980s, when gay men were often in a no-win situation:

...when copying more traditional patterns of monogamous sexual practices with long-term partners in private, gay men risked little social opprobrium, but in publicly displaying a promiscuous desire for the masculine they often felt the full wrath of their stigma and heterosexual society's homophobia.³⁸⁵

The novel is enclosed by the doors of the Feddens' big white Notting Hill house. On the opening pages Nick is pictured letting himself into Kensington Park Gardens; on the closing pages he locks the door behind him and walks away. The big, blue front door is a metaphor for the closed world into which Nick is temporarily admitted, only to be later cast out.

He loves 'coming home' to the house in the early evening 'when the wide treeless street was raked by the sun, and the two white terraces stared at each other with the glazed tolerance of rich neighbours.' (5) Nick particularly loves opening the front door with its three locks, then

³⁸⁵ Tim Edwards, *Cultures of Masculinity* (London: Routledge, 2006) .87

locking it again, once inside in the privacy that can be bought with great wealth, the ‘still security of the house.’⁽⁵⁾

The whole atmosphere of the building is so different from the cramped post-war house in Cherry Tree Lane, Barwick, where Nick grew up. The Feddens’ house boasts a ‘red-walled dining room’, a ‘double drawing room’ and numerous ‘white bedrooms’, far more rooms than one family needs and an image of excess. Kensington Park Gardens is part of the Ladbroke Estate in Notting Hill, one of the many large houses in the area to have been recently gentrified. In his study of the London rich, Peter Thorold observes that: ‘In the context of the rich, the importance of gentrification was that it prepared their way by transforming battered and shabby housing and in revivifying neighbourhoods it opened out new ground.’³⁸⁶ But what appears to be a progressive development with an increased provision of quality housing is an illusion. It will not benefit those most in need. As with the Feddens themselves, apparent benevolence masks blatant self-interest.

The former slum areas of Notting Hill have been seized upon by developers with an eye to *their* future, for in the eighties shrewd investors are putting their money into property.

Kensington Park Gardens was one of the best examples of the eighties property boom, writes Thorold, adding: ‘Nowhere can the prices and effect of upgrading be seen more clearly than on the Ladbroke Estate in Notting Hill.’³⁸⁷ The houses are given new status by Thatcher’s

³⁸⁶ Peter Thorold, The London Rich (Viking: London, 1999) 336.

³⁸⁷ Peter Thorold, The London Rich (Viking: London, 1999) 336.

free market and a new wealthy area is created, just the place for the up-and-coming Gerald Fedden.³⁸⁸ Nick muses:

There might well have been only three or four owners in the years since the whole speculation rose up out of the Notting Hill paddocks and slums. It was a house that encouraged the view its inhabitants had of themselves (492)

In their beautiful home, the Feddens see themselves as cultured objects of envy at the cutting edge of society, while Nick lets the house encourage *his* fantasy of his new London persona – as the adopted middle child of a wealthy and influential family. Daniel K. Hannah observes that Nick believes that his appreciation of style and the line of beauty will enable him to cut across ‘the lines of privilege and homophobic exclusivity’,³⁸⁹ Nick romanticises his future, leading a lover up the huge staircase, ‘...as if it were really his own, or would be one day: the pictures, the porcelain, the curvy French furniture so different from what he’s been brought up with.’ (5)

As with Bartlett’s Mr. Page when he gazes up at 18 Brooke Street, Nick’s ‘mythology of the house’ (6) is intimately bound up with his view of London. The house signifies privilege, freedom and possibility. Nick has already been brought to town in past summers to share Toby’s ‘London seasons’, which he describes as ‘long, thrilling escapes from his own far less glamorous family.’ (4) Before he even sees the house, he mythologises it: ‘To Nick the whole house, as yet only imagined, took on the light and shade of moods.’ (6)

³⁸⁸ Thorold states that semi-detached houses in the most favoured streets are running at over three million pounds at the time of writing in 1999. He comments: ‘“You have to be a banker to buy a house here now”, was a common observation.’ 338

³⁸⁹ Daniel K. Hannah, “The Private Life, the Public Stage: Henry James in Recent Fiction” Journal of Modern Literature (30.3.2007) 88.

On a summer evening soon after his arrival in London, Nick stands on the balcony, looking out over the gardens and listening to the polyphony of the London night. He seems to be surveying the whole of the city and its possibilities. He hears: ‘the unsleeping traffic rumble, far-off car horns and squeals of brakes; voices, faint shouts, a waveband twiddle of unconnected music.’ (19) – noises from another London, outside the Feddens’ privileged world. He wonders what picture he makes to the casual observer. He loves the fact that he appears ‘an enviable figure poised against the shining accomplished background of the lamplit room.’ (19) He wants to be seen in the spotlight and is starting to believe that he is a part of the house. His overwhelming feeling is of being on the brink of some new and exciting experience promised by the city. Standing on the balcony and looking over the railings, like a figure on the deck of a boat approaching a new country: ‘Nick felt he had been swept to the brink of some new promise, a scented vista or vision of the night, and then held there.’ (19)

Nick is euphoric, looking down on the city but the London below is both exciting and dangerous. He has a blind date arranged with Leo, a boy from Willesden, but all he has seen so far is a photograph of Leo with his racing bike. Nick has the memory of their brief telephone conversation and a voice which was ‘neutrally London, not recognizably black...’ (9). Leo is less than three miles north, yet worlds away from Kensington Park Gardens in terms of class, race and sexuality. Nick longs for Leo and the city streets. The image of the balcony illustrates his dilemma: he loves looking from his position of privilege with a panoptic vision over the metropolis, but he also wants to be down on the streets, creating his own routes around the city.

Soon after Nick's arrival, Notting Hill hosts its annual carnival. Many local residents fear this time, shutter their houses and leave the area, frightened since the riots of two summers earlier, but the heady mixture of danger and excitement is intoxicating to Nick. He lies in bed and listens to '...the long-legged beat of reggae from down the hill, mixed in, like the pulse of pleasure, with the sighing of the garden trees.' (44) Nick is up amongst the protective trees of Kensington Park Gardens, yet the reggae music pulls his thoughts down below the elite houses on the hill to the 'low culture' of the streets, and Leo.

The Feddens leave Notting Hill and the enticing carnival, for a family gathering out of town and Nick is full of wistful regret at missing the street celebrations. He imagines Leo moving amongst the crowds and dancing with strangers on the pavements and he longs to be with him, yet he wants to be at the Feddens' smart family party as well:

The music shocked him with its clear repetitive statement of what he wanted. Then one vast sound system warred happily with the next, so that there were different things he wanted, beautiful jarring futures for him... (45)

Nick is in love with the range of possibilities that London offers and that includes the Feddens. The communal gardens at Notting Hill Gardens symbolise this, offering secrecy and security, with 'hidden' and 'discreet' places:

The communal gardens were as much part of Nick's romance of London as the house itself: big as the central park of some old European city, but private and densely hedged on three sides with holly and shrubbery behind high Victorian railings. (15)

Nick takes Leo here on their first date, when they discover that they are 'two men on a summer night, with nowhere to call their own.' (35) They have nowhere to go. Leo's Mother's house is out of the question while Leo would not be welcome in Gerald's home, so

Nick unlocks the garden gate with its impressive Victorian cast-iron scrolls. Enclosed, with their own private access, the gardens are a liminal space, both public and private and a safe way of sampling the dangers of the street. They are not in the house, though part of it, but not quite in the street, either, a metaphor for Nick's life at the time. He is neither a member of the Feddens' privileged world in his own right, nor a member of Leo's. When he opens the gate he warns Leo ' "Cycling isn't permitted in the gardens,"'(36) to which Leo replies: ' "I dare say bumshoving isn't permitted either,"' (36)

Even in this discreet and privileged space they still have to hide their sexuality. They head for the shadowy parts of the garden where: 'There were hidden places, even on the inside, the path that curled, as if to a discreet convenience, to the gardener's hut behind a larch-lap fence'.(15) This is the path he and Leo take, stepping off the straight walkway and following the more inviting curved path to the mystery and beauty of a new sexual encounter.

Nick's starry-eyed view of his new sex life is set against the backdrop of the house and this adds an extra level of erotic excitement. His emotions are regularly described through a romanticised image of the city. Earlier that evening he experiences '... a feeling, as the sky darkened and the street lamps brightened from pink to gold, that it was going to work out.' (32) Nick believes that London offers him a golden future and his anticipation grows as he waits for Leo. Standing alone, he is: '...aware of the unending soft roar of London and a night breeze hardly dipping the dark leaves of the laurel.' (39) The roar of the city is the soundtrack to his loss of virginity, and the climax of the scene presents Nick as if he is on stage, in the spotlight:

... just before he came he had a brief vision of himself, as if the trees and bushes had rolled away and all the lights of London shone in on him: little Nick Guest from Barwick, Don and Dot Guest's boy, fucking a stranger in a Notting Hill Garden at night. Leo was right, it was so bad, and it was so much the best thing he'd ever done. (40)

Nick's fantasy has all the qualities of a theatrical transformation scene: the curtains open and the trees and undergrowth roll back to reveal the new Nick Guest! He's *arrived* in London and fantasises that he no longer needs to hide his sexuality. He imagines he is in the full glare of the lights and doesn't have to skulk in the dark anymore; he can be free in public. Except that this is an illusion of freedom, a romanticised view of sex in the city. He is not in public – he is in the Feddens' garden and he cannot enjoy the spotlight *and* life at Kensington Park Gardens. There are hints of future problems even on this most triumphant of nights when Nick feels the need to avoid looking up at the Feddens' house, sensing its unease: '...he had a sense of being noticed by the house, and the verdict of "vulgar and unsafe" seemed to creep out like a mist and tarnish the triumph of the evening.' (42)

Nick has a strong feeling that the house is judging him. Kensington Park Gardens represents the Tory view, the party line to which Gerald and Rachel ultimately subscribe. Gerald's colleague, Hector Maltby, a junior minister in the Foreign Office, had recently been caught with a rent boy in his Jaguar at Jack Straw's Castle and had 'rapidly resigned' from his post and his marriage. (24) When Nick hears Gerald discussing this misdemeanour, he doesn't feel Maltby really deserves his solidarity. Hypocritically, Nick feels that Maltby's squalid encounter doesn't fit in with his own romantic dreams, which are: '...aesthetically radiant images of gay activity, gathering in a golden future for him, like swimmers on a sunlit bank.' (25)

However, though Gerald and Rachel pay lip-service to tolerance, the same rules will apply to Nick as to Maltby. Even though Nick does take Leo into the house to spend the night there, he is only able to do so once, when Gerald and Rachel are away. Gay, black and from a Willesden council estate, Leo would not be acceptable to the family and Nick colludes with this when he keeps him away from them.

The Feddens' house, which stared so disapprovingly at the lovers, is presented as a moral barometer of the times, with its moods and 'pompous spaces' (7). When Catherine's parents are uneasy about her unsuitable boyfriends the young men are described as 'consciously chosen for their unacceptability at Kensington Park Gardens...' (7) This disapproval is expressed in terms of the house, rather than her parents directly. The house is a physical representation of their wealth and class values.

There are clues even in Part One of the double standards of the family. When Brentford, a West Indian cab driver and friend of Catherine, brings her home when she's been dumped by her boyfriend, he is viewed by the Feddens as: '... completely and critically different from everything else in the house.' (149) Instead of thanking him, Gerald demands to know how he has got to know Catherine, while Rachel looks at the cab driver with 'a hint of fear in her face, as if Brentford had brought some threat much larger than Catherine's tantrum into the house.' (149) The same unease is reserved for Nick, too. Brentford has brought his race into the house, Nick has brought his sexuality. Neither is welcome and both are ultimately seen as a threat.

To celebrate Toby's 21st birthday, Nick joins the family at the 1880s country house of Rachel's brother, Lord Lionel Kessler. Travelling along the imposing drive, which rivals that of Manderley, Nick is floored by the 'sheer staring presence of the place.' (48) It appeals to his romantic imagination when they are met by a 'real' butler in striped morning trousers.

Lord Kessler is an enigma. He never opens his stately home to the public and seems generally private and reserved. Nick finds him fascinating and when they are in the library, notices an air of secrecy about his 'discreet' cologne. (52) Even the family seem to know little about him. When Catherine's boyfriend Russell asks her: ' "He's a fruit, is he, Uncle Lionel?"' (59), she denies this although she has previously asked Nick: ' "What do you think, he's not gay, is he?"' (57)

On meeting the man, Nick observes: 'Kessler had never married, but there was nothing perceptibly homosexual about him.' (50) Certainly, as a man of about sixty, Kessler would have spent the first half of his life in a climate where homosexuality was illegal and punishable by prison so, as a gay man, would have had to have developed strategies to move in all of the select circles that his class required.

There is a strong suggestion of a link between Kessler and Henry James, Nick's hero and the subject of his thesis on hidden sexuality. In conversation with Kessler, Nick constantly feels things are unsaid. When he tries to explain the subject of his thesis, Nick tells Kessler that he is writing about '...style that hides things and reveals things at the same time,' (54) He then

feels he is being indiscreet, as if he is suggesting Kessler has something to hide. He is referring to James, but he could be commenting on Kessler as well.

When Kessler describes Nick as a ‘James man’, he replies: “Oh, absolutely!” – Nick grinned with pleasure and defiance, it was a kind of coming out,...’ (54) He feels defiant because by telling Kessler about James, he is implicitly telling him about his own sexuality, and he thinks Kessler will understand the code. Another link is made between Kessler and James when he tells Nick that the Master stayed at Hawkeswood in 1903. He shows Nick two large leather-bound photograph albums, the inspection of which is ‘tantalising.’ (55) This is reminiscent of Will Beckwith’s reaction to the mosaic in Lord Nantwich’s cellar. Like the pieces of pictures on the swimming pool floor, the fragments of photo albums are clues that make Nick want to find out more about what went on in the house in the past. He muses: ‘Now the house seemed settled and seasoned, a century old, with its own historic light and odour, but then it was ostentatiously new.’ (55) A hundred years have gone and the history has become something that is official and accepted. However, there is an unofficial history to be read in the pictures, too.

Nick looks at the group photos, longing for days to go through them and explore their secrets.

Finally, he finds the picture of his hero:

And then, May 1903, a gathering of twenty or so, second row, Lady Fairlie, The Hon. Simeon Kessler, Mr. Henry James, Mrs. Langtry, The Earl of Hexham...a cheerful informal picture. The Master, with his thumb in his striped waistcoat, eyes shaded by a traveller’s wide-brimmed hat, looked rather crafty. (55)

When the names are listed, there is a parallel between Henry James and Nick, visiting the house in 1983. Nick, too, is an outsider amongst Honourables, Ladies and Lords. Mrs Langtry, the King’s ‘official’ mistress is allowed to be photographed, but a gay man at this

time would have had to be discreet. Such double standards are still in operation in the 1980s. When Nick is with Catherine in the grounds at Hawkeswood: 'He wished he was in a position to speak about Leo as freely as she spoke about Russell.' (57) The difference between Nick and his hero, however, is highlighted by Julie Rivkin, who writes of James: 'his "crafty" expression as he stands there amidst the titled company suggests someone who is undeceived by the worldliness that dazzles and seduces Nick.'³⁹⁰

Kessler asks Nick about his history and how he came to know Toby:

'You were contemporaries?'

'Yes, we were, exactly,' said Nick, and the word seemed to throw a historic light across the mere three years since he had first seen Toby in the porter's lodge and felt a sudden obliviousness of everything else.' (53)

The 'historic light' of the word ' contemporaries' glosses over and conceals the truth of Nick's feelings for Toby and Nick's version of their history is edited out. Nick's description would involve the line of beauty, a concept that he tries to explain later at the family's French holiday home:

He couldn't unwind the line of beauty for Catherine, because it explained almost everything, and to her it would seem a trivial delusion, it would seem mad, as she said. He wouldn't be here in this room, in this country, if he hadn't seen Toby that morning in the college lodge, if Toby hadn't burnt in five seconds onto the eager blank of his mind. (349)

Nick believes that he has followed something that is beautiful and it has led him on to more and more beauty, which he will follow.

³⁹⁰ Julie Rivkin, "Writing the Gay '80s with Henry James: David Leavitt's A Place I've Never Been and Alan Hollinghurst's The Line of Beauty" The Henry James Review (26.3.2005) 289.

Nick may be writing about James and hidden sexuality, but he appears to understand little about his more immediate gay history. He shows a certain disdain for two men from whom he could learn a lot about fighting heterosexual disapproval.

Nick meets Old Pete through Leo and quickly realises that the two men share ‘the steadiness of something both long-established and over’ (107) Pete represents an already existing gay London world. When he learns Nick has only been in the city for six weeks, he asks him if he is still ‘doing the rounds’, listing pubs and clubs that represent a well-established gay subculture, most of which are completely unknown to Nick. ‘The rounds’ suggests a known route to be followed. Nick replies ‘I’m exploring a bit’, but he has rarely ventured far out of the security of Kensington Park Gardens.

Pete is in his mid-forties, so would have been 29 in 1967 and 18 in 1956, and represents a different generation of gay experience. He would have had direct experience of the ‘gay purge’ of the fifties and, living through these times, sexuality would always have been a defining issue for him. Nick finds this old campaigner threatening:

He wore tight old jeans and a denim shirt, and something else, which was an attitude, a wearily aggressive challenge – he seemed to come forward from an era of sexual defiance and fighting alliances and to cast a dismissive eye over a little chit like Nick, who had never fought for anything. (106)

Nick feels a mixture of discomfort’, ‘snobbery’ and ‘timidity’ when he looks into Pete’s world. Pete scares and unsettles him, but Nick also looks down on him as having little relevance to his own world and its advantages of youth and class. He is discomfited at how quickly Pete guesses and defines his taste in men, which ‘he had only just guessed at himself.’(108) His romance of himself as an intellectual does not allow for such transparency.

Nick is particularly uncomfortable at Pete's use of the pronoun 'she' when talking about Leo and has to stop himself flinching when Pete comments: ' "That's what I call her," said Pete. 'Leontyne Price-tag.'" (109) Nick recalls that he has 'laboured through' conversations calling men 'she', but that 'he'd never found it as necessary or hilarious as some people did.' (109)

Nick doesn't understand the significance of camp as a weapon against oppression and its place in gay history. Andy Medhurst gives the example of early Gay Liberation protests: 'Which often drew on cross-dressing, gender-blurring and flagrant theatricality before those elements were sacrificed in favour of politer methods.'³⁹¹ Nick has not felt the necessity to be assertive about his sexuality in the face of prejudice yet. Neil Bartlett argues for the importance of camp language in questioning hetero-normative assumptions:

The small phrase *look at her*, as applied to a straight man by a queen holding court with her sisters, redraws the perspectives of the city. It undermines the authority of the dictionary in its function of guide book to our culture's sights and monuments.³⁹²

Camp language is part of the unofficial heritage of the city which, Medhurst asserts, has been '...conceptualized from the historical, palpable, raw material of gay men's cultural experiences...'³⁹³ It is a heritage that Nick distances himself from.

³⁹¹ Andy Medhurst, "Camp" Lesbian and Gay Studies, A critical Introduction eds. Andy Medhurst and Sally Munt (London: Cassell, 1997) 282.

³⁹² Neil Bartlett, Who Was That Man? (London: Serpent's Tail, 1988) 85.

³⁹³ Andy Medhurst, "Camp" Lesbian and Gay Studies, A critical Introduction ed. Andy Medhurst and Sally Munt (London: Cassell, 1997) 290.

Catherine's godfather, Pat Grayson, is another older gay man whom Nick finds irrelevant and mildly embarrassing. Unlike Henry James, Pat represents the 'low' culture of TV, where he has starred in the popular drama series *Sedley*. This is Nick's mother's favourite programme, 'though it wasn't clear if she knew that Pat was a whatnot.' (79). Nick watches him camping it up on the dance-floor at Toby's 21st party and describes him as 'a famous man who was a fool, a silly old queen' (79) His reaction displays the arrogance of youth and aesthetic snobbery.

When he hears of Pat's death from AIDS in 1986, Nick reflects that he had not cared for his 'brand of cagey camp' (336) and had been 'snotty and even priggish' with him. (336) This is similar to the way that Nick reacts to Pete. Nick sees Pat disdainfully, as 'an unwelcome future.' He does not understand that, as Andy Medhurst argues:

Camp answers heterosexual disapproval through a strategy of defensive offensiveness. Camp thrives on paradoxes, incarnating the homophobe's worst fears, confirming that not only do queers dare to exist but they actively flaunt and luxuriate in their queerness.
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For Nick's generation, camp seems just a question of taste while for Pete's generation it was, in Medhurst's words, 'a survival mechanism in a hostile environment.'³⁹⁵

³⁹⁴ Andy Medhurst, "Camp" *Lesbian and Gay Studies, A critical Introduction* ed. Andy Medhurst and Sally Munt (London: Cassell, 1997) 276.

³⁹⁵ Andy Medhurst, "Camp" *Lesbian and Gay Studies, A critical Introduction* ed. Andy Medhurst and Sally Munt (London: Cassell, 1997) 276.

In the first section of the novel, London crackles with excitement but, by Part Two, the city is changing, becoming brittle and glittering with Thatcherite enterprise and the coke-fuelled shine of new eighties' money. Everywhere the old city is being ripped down to make way for functional, transparent architecture. This is a society that is pretending to be libertarian, but the reason for the transparency is so its people can be observed and, as Michel Foucault has argued, will be aware that they are being watched:

He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection...it is a perpetual victory that avoids any physical confrontation and which is always decided in advance.³⁹⁶

Nick notices the changes when he goes to meet an old friend who works in Lionel Kessler's London bank: 'Kesslers had just rebuilt their city premises, with a steel and glass atrium and high-tech dealing-floors fitted in behind the old palazzo façade.' (203) Nick watches the bank staff as they hurry past the commissionaire who, in a parody of the past, still wears tails and a top hat: 'On the exposed escalators the employees were carried up and down, looking both slavish and intensely important.' (203) All the glass and space creates an illusion of openness and freedom when, in fact, the employees are just more visible in this transparent building, hence more easily watched and controlled.

Nick has started a relationship with Oxford contemporary Wani Ouradi, son of Bertrand Ouradi, a millionaire Lebanese Tory peer. If the truth about Wani's life were to be exposed

³⁹⁶ Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish (London: Penguin, 1977) 203.

his family would be publically humiliated so, instead, Wani lives a double life. He returns regularly to the opulent family home in fashionable Lowndes Square and socializes with the family and his beautiful ‘fiancée’, Martine, who is paid for by his mother in order to preserve the illusion of heterosexuality for Bertrand. Like the Feddens, the Ouradis are another Tory family who can’t accept homosexuality when it comes too close. Wani has just acquired a newly converted 1830s house, the top two floors of which are a flat and the ground floor a gleaming open plan office called Ogee, the headquarters of Wani and Nick’s new venture – the production of a glossy art magazine which is both elitist and rarefied.

The name derives from Hogarth’s ‘line of beauty’, a double curve which turns first one way and then the other. The name was Nick’s idea: ‘...it had a rightness to it, being both English and exotic, like so many things he loved. The ogee curve was pure expression, decorative not structural...’ (200) It has no function other than its own aesthetic existence. On the carved bed, with a canopy of two transecting ogees, Nick considers the artistic form:

He ran his hand down Wani’s back. He didn’t think Hogarth had illustrated this best example of it, the dip and swell – he had chosen harps and branches, bones rather than flesh. Really it was time for a new *Analysis of Beauty*. (200)

In a further ironic twist, Hollinghurst shows Wani in Nick’s room at the Feddens’, cutting a line of coke on a copy of ‘*Henry James and the Question of Romance* by Mildred R. Pullman.’ (252) he looks at his handiwork with pride and says to Nick: ‘Now there’s a line of beauty for you.’ (255)

Nick is often frustrated by Wani’s demand for secrecy about their relationship and shows a certain naiveté when he reproaches Wani with: ‘I’ve never pretended not to be gay, it’s you that’s doing that, my dear. This is 1986. Things have changed.’ To which Wani ironically

replies: ‘Yes. All the poofs are dropping like flies.’ (254) Things *had* changed for gay men for a while, but Wani’s response sums up his anxiety now felt in the face of widespread homophobia, attacks on the gay community and the threat of HIV and AIDS. Like Nantwich in the 1950s, Nick and Wani are living in a climate of media hysteria and government ignorance. Still, however, Nick is seduced by the decade’s glamour and glitter, as Julie Rivkin observes: ‘Nicholas lives as much in denial of AIDS as he does in denial of the corruption and greed and other unsavory elements of the decade.’³⁹⁷ Nick naively appears to believe that, as an aesthete, he can rise above its dishonesty.

By the second section of the novel, HIV and AIDS have struck Britain and, as Matt Cook points out: ‘Press coverage of gay men and AIDS in the 1980s was unsympathetic, sensational and overtly homophobic.’³⁹⁸ While AIDS was seen as something which mainly affected the gay community, then the government did nothing practical to help, preferring instead to see HIV and AIDS as a ‘gay plague’. Seeing the problem as of little relevance to his life, in July 1986 Gerald is putting *his* energies into organizing a musical supper party at Kensington Park Gardens. He displays nostalgia for the past, rather than an engagement with a difficult present.

In 1986, there is a fashion for house parties to include concerts. Rachel’s brother has employed the Medici Quartet, and Nick recalls that: ‘Denis Beckwith, a handsome old

³⁹⁷ Julie Rivkin, “Writing the Gay '80s with Henry James: David Leavitt's A Place I've Never Been and Alan Hollinghurst's The Line of Beauty.” The Henry James Review (26.3.2005) 288.

³⁹⁸ Matt Cook, A Gay History of Britain (Oxford:Greenwood World, 2007) 204

saurian of the right enjoying fresh acclaim these days, had hired Kiri te Kanawa to sing Mozart and Strauss at his eighty-fifth birthday party.’ (246)

Beckwith first appears in Hollinghurst’s novel The Swimming Pool Library as the former Director of Public Prosecutions and the driving force behind the 1950s gay ‘witch hunt’. Nick notes that in 1986 Beckwith is currently enjoying fresh popularity and he would certainly be in his element in amidst the vitriolic stigmatising of gay men in the wake of AIDS. As Alan Sinfield observes: ‘For the right-wing bigot, AIDS was a godsend.’³⁹⁹

From this brief reference, it is apparent that Beckwith is still going strong, celebrating his longevity with no sense of disappearing from the public gaze due to shame or any review of his actions. On the contrary, he would be riding high in the current climate, which appears to justify all of his earlier prejudices. Charles Nantwich, the gay peer with a weak heart who ended up in prison under Beckwith’s ‘crusade to eradicate male vice’,⁴⁰⁰ probably hasn’t survived.

This sighting of Beckwith draws direct parallels between the mid 1980s and the 1950s’ prejudices experienced by gay men. The 1950s ‘purge’ was a response to what was seen by some as a loosening of morals during the war. The post-war years in the U.K. were another period of the re-assertion of the ‘traditional family’. Jeffrey Weeks describes campaigns against ‘sexual perversity’ which ‘underlined the terrors beneath the patina of normality’ in

³⁹⁹ Alan Sinfield, Cultural Politics - Queer Reading (London: Routledge, 2005) 77.

⁴⁰⁰ Alan Hollinghurst, The Swimming Pool Library (London: Vintage, 1998) 260.

the 1950s.⁴⁰¹ This is echoed by events in the mid-1980s when ‘The media panic about AIDS, largely fed by homophobia, far from galvanizing government, had terrorized it.’⁴⁰²

Government Minister, Gerald Fedden, is reaffirming his allegiance to the importance of the traditional family with a musical gathering in his family home.

During Gerald’s musical soirée, Nick is again pictured looking out from the balcony over London. Standing on the same spot in 1983, he was looking out into the city and his future but he is now already focussing on the past. The birds fall silent and he is aware of an ‘invincible solitude stretching out from the past like the slowly darkening east.’ (259) As the distant couple who had been reclining on the grass ‘faded and disappeared’ Nick stares out into the darkness alone. (259)

Increasingly aware of the spectre of AIDS, Nick is even more in need of support, yet he appears isolated. The contacts he makes through the Feddens, although influential, stand for values that go against his desires and will not sustain him in the same way as a community of his own friends would. Something other than Margaret Thatcher’s view of a world of simply ‘individual men and women... and families’⁴⁰³ is needed by Nick.

⁴⁰¹ Jeffrey Weeks, The World We Have Won (Oxford: Routledge, 2007) 21.

⁴⁰² Jeffrey Weeks, The World We Have Won (Oxford: Routledge, 2007) 17.

⁴⁰³ Margaret Thatcher, “Interview for Women’s Own Magazine (“no such thing as society”) 31Oct.1987,” Margaret Thatcher Foundation 24June 2007
< <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/speeches/displaydocument.asp?docid=106689>>

Reflecting on the AIDS crisis in the 1980s, Alan Sinfield observes: ‘In the face of AIDS, gay community is more, not less, necessary and rewarding.’⁴⁰⁴ However, as in The Swimming Pool Library, there is little sense of a gay community operating in the novel. The only brief glimpse is at Hampstead ponds, later in the novel, when AIDS is starting to take its toll. An elderly man informs Nick: ‘ “George has gone, then. Steve’s just told me, went last night...he was always here. He was only thirty-one.”’ (182)

For most of his time at The Feddens’, Nick appears not to want the company of a wide circle of friends of his own. He thinks that privilege exempts him and Wani from any need of support from a community. However, there are moments which suggest otherwise, like the romantic image when Nick is swimming across the Hampstead pool. As he arrives at a floating raft in the middle, someone helps him up and two men make room for him:

He stood breathing and grinning in a loose but curious embrace with the men in the middle. He had a sense of something fleeting and harmonic, longed for and repeated – it was the circling trees, perhaps, and the silver water, the embrace of a solitary childhood, and the need to be pulled up into a waiting circle of men. (185-6)

The image of the life-raft presents a sense of what a community could be. The embrace is ‘curious’ for Nick, since it is not purely sexual. Wani, who Nick has brought to the pool for the first time, is distinctly uncomfortable. Forced to hide his sexuality from his rich father, who would in all probability disown him if he publicly came out, Wani is not used to meeting people like this, ‘...in the near-naked free-for-all of a public place.’ (187)

⁴⁰⁴ Alan Sinfield, Cultural Politics – Queer Reading (London, Routledge, 2005) 77.

Jeffrey Weeks points out that to grow in a new community, a wider sense of belonging is necessary in order to validate one's own identity: 'A sense of community, of wider belonging, was more than a pious aspiration. In a real sense it was a precondition of making new identities possible'⁴⁰⁵ The raft provides an image of the life Nick could have made for himself in the city if he had spent more time exploring the London streets and less time observing from the heights of sophisticated restaurants and pompous houses, in the company of the privileged and reactionary.

The reaction from the Feddens to the death from AIDS of Pat Grayson is indicative of Gerald's party's attitude to the disease in the 1980s. The family is in the middle of a visit by Maurice and Sally Tipper, when the news of Grayson's death arrives and there is a 'communal effort by the rest of the family to veil the matter.' (333), exposing Gerald and Rachel's apparent liberalism as false.

Rachel, who claimed to be fond of him, still won't admit the cause of Pat's death and tries to suggest that Pat had 'picked up some extraordinary bug in the far east' (354). Catherine, however, makes a dramatic announcement of the truth to the whole table. Later, Nick draws a parallel between Pat and Sally's mother's final illness. Sir Maurice barks: 'She hadn't brought it on herself,' (339)

The scene displays Nick's naivety, since he feels he should 'come out' to the Tippers because of his own anger at their response to AIDS and homosexuality. He is shocked and astonished

⁴⁰⁵ Jeffrey Weeks, The World We Have Won (Oxford: Routledge, 2007) 82.

when Wani refuses to back him up and goes on to reinforce the illusion of his own heterosexuality with the comment: ‘I’m probably just old-fashioned on these things, but actually I was brought up to believe in no sex before marriage’. (340) The fact that Nick feels so betrayed shows that he still doesn’t know how the worlds of Wani and Gerald work. He is still unable to read the world that he is moving in as one that favours the individual over the community, where there is no such thing as society.

At the start of Part Three, Nick is on the balcony again, but this is a very different experience to the one at the start of the novel. Now Leo is dead and it is the night of the 1987 Tory election victory. This was an ominous time, according to Matt Cook:

The government played the family and morality ticket strongly in its 1987 election campaign, and after Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher’s third successive election victory, she used her conference speech of that year to “question those who claim an inalienable right to be gay”.⁴⁰⁶

This was closely followed by Clause 28, added to the 1988 Local Government Act, and described by Jeffrey Weeks as ‘the most significant attack on the lesbian and gay community for almost a hundred years.’⁴⁰⁷ The law banned the promotion of homosexuality by local authorities and the teaching in state schools of the acceptability of homosexuality as ‘a pretended family relationship’.⁴⁰⁸

⁴⁰⁶ Jeffrey Weeks, The World We Have Won (Oxford: Routledge, 2007) 204.

⁴⁰⁷ Jeffrey Weeks, The World We Have Won (Oxford: Routledge, 2007) 17.

⁴⁰⁸ Matt Cook, A Gay History of Britain (Oxford: Greenwood World, 2007) 205.

A third Thatcher victory and the impending death of Wani from AIDS make for a chill of foreboding: 'Nick topped up his drink and went out onto the balcony. He rallied to the surprising chill out there.'(422) He thinks back to the start of his affair with Leo and with London, and 'the beautiful rawness of those days.'(415) In the new knowledge of Leo's death, he longs for the warmth and innocence of that summer.

One of the most poignant scenes in the novel is of Wani, too weak through AIDS to drive himself home, being delivered to his mother and an old servant woman by Nick:

Wani himself, with the women at each elbow, seemed to shrink into their keeping; the sustaining social malice of the past two hours abandoned him at the threshold. They forgot their manners, and the door was closed again without anyone saying goodbye. (442)

It is as if Nick doesn't exist. He is not considered part of the family and is excluded without a thought. This is a striking image of the denial of AIDS, of gay men and of Nick, Wani's lover. Matt Cook observes that the exclusion of gay men from their friends and lovers who were ill was often a common occurrence with such a stigmatised illness and death:

...non family members found themselves shut out of medical decisions and funeral arrangements. As there was no legal recognition of same-sex couples, surviving lovers had no rights in the law when it came to illness, death and inheritance.⁴⁰⁹

⁴⁰⁹ Matt Cook, A Gay History of Britain (Oxford: Greenwood World, 2007) 202.

There is a tremendous sense of isolation experienced by Nick and Wani in the wake of his illness. In spite of the fact that by 1987 there would have been help available from organizations such as the Terrence Higgins Trust or Gay Switchboard, neither seems to be aware that such agencies exist. Nick describes the HIV test as something experienced totally alone. Although he finally begins to recognize that he is part of a shared experience, there appear to be no support systems for him when : ‘The words that were said every day to others would be said to him, in that quiet consulting room whose desk and carpet and square modern armchair would share indissolubly in the moment.’ (500) The room is empty and there is no one with any kind words. Nick wonders: ‘What would he do once he left the room?’ (500)

In the December 1989 edition of Capital Gay, Tony Whitehead writes of the gay community’s achievement in providing education and support groups for sufferers of the virus that have ‘...grown out of the kind of community we were long before anyone had heard of AIDS...In a decade where Thatcher said there was no such thing as society, only people and families, the gay community has proved her wrong’⁴¹⁰ So, where is this community in Nick’s world? He has become so isolated in his privileged life that he has lost touch with the life of the streets that he so longed for with Leo.

Nick’s romance with Kensington Park Gardens comes to an end when the house itself is ‘outed’ by the tabloids. In an attempt to wound her father, Catherine has exposed his secret affair with his secretary and, along with this, Nick and Wani’s secret too. The tabloid accusations of insider-dealing and the clunky alliteration of ‘Millionaire MP, his Elegant Wife, his Blonde, or His Blushing Blonde Secretary’ (462) are damaging, but it is only when

⁴¹⁰ Tony Whitehead, “Look Back With Pride” Capital Gay (22 Dec.1989:4).

the words 'gay' and 'AIDS' are linked to his household that Gerald feels it necessary to resign.

When the stories hit the papers, the scandal is described not in terms of Gerald, but of his London house. The headline reads: 'Gay Sex Link to Minister's House'. The house, symbol of the successful Thatcherite family in - as Gerald once described it - 'our splendid property-owning democracy' (67-8) is now flawed. Gerald's business partner, Barry Groom sums up the idea that Nick has somehow sullied The Fedden's family home, when he asks Gerald: 'I mean, what's the little pansy doing here? Why have you got a little ponce hanging round your house the whole fucking time?' (476) Barry and the Fedden family are closing ranks.

Daniel K. Hannah observes that Hollinghurst's novel questions the place of the 'guest' in Western culture:

The Line of Beauty points to the gay citizen's status within the nation-state as the ever-invited yet excluded 'guest' of both the conjugal family and the family's institutional extension, the state.⁴¹¹

Both the domestic and the political family underline the fragile nature of Nick's position in this ultimately homophobic Thatcherite society. Hannah's comments can also be seen to echo Alan Sinfield's argument that, at its height, the AIDS pandemic countermanded any

⁴¹¹ Daniel K. Hannah, "The Private Life, the Public Stage: Henry James in Recent Fiction" Journal of Modern Literature (30.3.2007) 85.

advantages gained by the lesbian and gay communities. For the Tories: ‘It had all been a fantasy – “The family” should set the limits of human experience.’⁴¹²

The creeping fear of an undermining of ‘the traditional family’⁴¹³ was underlined by the media in the 1980s. In A Vision of Love Revealed in Sleep, Neil Bartlett quotes a radio ‘phone-in of the time:

...the time has come to ban this homosexual propaganda in the schools and on the television these people have to realise that their obnoxious sexual practices are a danger to our society and a very great one indeed and you might invite one into your home without knowing it...⁴¹⁴

The ‘dangerous’ guest invited into the Feddens’ home is Nick. He is pictured on the front page ‘...letting himself in at the front door of this house...’ (472) Ironically, this is where Nick began his London journey. The keys to the Feddens’ home opened many influential doors to him, doors which are now being slammed in his face.

Another picture shows Nick at the party at Hawkeswood photographed, like his hero Henry James, amongst the Lords and Ladies, like James, his sexuality elided.

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Bartlett writes that, in his search for gay history, he has often been drawn to court reports and newspaper accounts of trials or scandals as the only official accounts of homosexual lives.

The photographs of Nick and the story printed in the newspapers will be the official record of what happened at that time. However, the photos of James with royalty in Kessler’s old albums and Nick on the front page of The Sun only tell part of the story.

⁴¹² Alan Sinfield, Cultural Politics - Queer Reading (London: Routledge, 2005) 77.

⁴¹³ Margaret Thatcher, The Downing Street Years (London: Harper Collins, 1993) 629 -630.

⁴¹⁴ Neil Bartlett, “A Vision of Love Revealed in Sleep” Solo Voices (London: Oberon, 2005) 32.

Gerald's final bigoted outburst to Nick is framed in terms of the sanctity of the family, despite Nick's long-term discretion over Gerald's affair with Penny:

'Gerald said, "I've been giving it some thought. It's the sort of thing you read about, it's an old homo trick. You can't have a real family, so you attach yourself to someone else's. And I suppose after a while you just couldn't bear it, you must have been very envious I think of everything we have, and coming from your background too perhaps... and you've wreaked some pretty awful revenge on us as a result. And actually, you know..." he raised his hands, "all we asked for was loyalty." (481)

Gerald's assumption that there is such a thing as a 'real' family displays the right-wing prejudice endemic in laws such as Clause 28 and its assumptions of 'real' and 'pretended' families. Gerald feels he can speak to Nick in this way, not just because of his sexuality, but also his class. It is significant that he makes no reference to Wani Ouradi and his part in the scandal. Wani is the son of Bertrand, a rich friend of Gerald's and a member of the House of Lords.

When Nick goes back to Kensington Park Gardens to collect his things he is aware of how far the house is protected from the sounds of the London streets:

Inside, in the hall: the sound... the impassive rumble of London shrunk to a hum, barely noticed, as if the grey light itself were subtly acoustic. Nick felt he'd chanced on the undisturbed atmosphere of the house, larger than this year's troubles, as it had been without him and would be after he'd gone. (491)

Nick is insignificant in the life of the house, which is barely ruffled by the world outside its walls. Its insular pomposity disregards the needs of others and will dismiss anyone who threatens its equilibrium. Nick has a heightened awareness of the smell of the house, tapestries, lilies and polished wood: 'And it all reached back. It spoke of Gerald and Rachel without visible interruption.' (491) Gerald and Rachel will continue their lives there, without any long-term disruption. She will stand by him and the family will close ranks around them.

Gerald has already been offered a directorship at a salary of eighty thousand pounds a year and he will more than likely be back in the Government before long. Penny imparts some wisdom that Nick should really have gained during his time at the London house: ‘That’s how this world works, Nick. Gerald can’t lose. You’ve got to understand that.’ (497)

Nick closes the beautiful front door for the last time and throws his keys back through the letterbox, and then he peers through at them, now inaccessible. These keys have opened more than just this impressive door for Nick, but the one he is most reluctant to relinquish is the ‘sleek bronze Yale for the communal gardens; it had a look of secrets to it.’ (500) This is the key that opened the door to the relationship with Leo, the key that opened the door to his new life and to the glorious, innocent summer of 1983.

Standing in Kensington Park Gardens, Nick looks up at the façades of the houses. Unlike the sun-drenched brightness of the white terrace when he arrived in London, the house-fronts now have ‘a muted gleam’. They seem to reflect what James Wood describes as: ‘the rise and dip of the money-infested, sex-loaded 1980s, a spoiled ogee curve of its own.’⁴¹⁵ Nick has the appointment for his HIV test that afternoon and is suddenly struck by the thought that it will be positive, because of his unprotected sex, before the knowledge of HIV. The Notting Hill house now becomes an image from a world that will continue unperturbed without him. Nick imagines his own death and the reactions of those who know him: ‘Nick searched their faces as they explored their feelings. He seemed to fade pretty quickly.’ (501)

⁴¹⁵ James Wood, “The Ogee Curve: review of The Line of Beauty by Alan Hollinghurst.” The New Republic (13 December 2004) 49.

He stares at the house, finally seeing beauty not only in the ornate ‘stucco swags and bows’ (501) but, in the face of an early death, any house on any street would seem beautiful. It has become a symbol of all that Nick has aspired to and now lost, perhaps even life itself.

Hollinghurst’s bleak pessimism is the other side of the coin from Bartlett’s take on ‘the plague years in Thatcher’s London’. Any sympathies with Nick at his brutal expulsion and isolation are qualified by an awareness that the London society to which he has so earnestly sought to belong, is in no sense a “truly” supportive community. If Hollinghurst is not directly giving a voice to the voiceless here, he is savagely critiquing the forces that are trying to silence them. His depiction treats Thatcherite dogma with contemptuous irony, turning Section 28 on its head by representing, not the gay community, but the selfish Feddens, as “a pretended family relationship.” Such a clear spotlight in a dark time may still offer hope.

CONCLUSION

Conclusion

The novels of Neil Bartlett, Sarah Waters and Alan Hollinghurst depict city spaces filled with a multiplicity of stories clamouring to be heard. By using fiction to re-present the past, they privilege the imagination and de-centre the authority of the traditional historical account.

Through polyvocal storytelling⁴¹⁶ re-imagining history becomes a democratic activity with space for a wealth of diverse voices.

The novels deliberately destabilize traditional teleological narratives, through employing multiple narrators, intertextuality and non-linear time. They resist closure and foreground the subversive voices of those whose stories have been stifled or ignored.

Waters, Bartlett and Hollinghurst are presenting queer histories which, as Mark Turner argues, must tell the story without ‘levelling it out’.⁴¹⁷ To level out history could mean presenting it in the form of an over-arching master narrative, or excluding characters because

⁴¹⁶ Jeffrey Weeks, The World We Have Won (London: Routledge, 2007) 11.

⁴¹⁷ Mark Turner Backward Glances (London: Reaction, 2003) 43.

of their gender, sexuality or class. It is the task of queer histories to ‘challenge, undermine, refute and reconfigure the very notion of norms in ‘history’’.⁴¹⁸

These writers ‘queer’ the city through focussing on it as space. The gaps and possibilities of liminal sites such as music halls and bathhouses offer the reader a history distinct from official master narratives. They present the city as a queer space, offering what Michel de Certeau describes as mapping from below, against the hegemony of official planners. Their protagonists blur the official boundaries between public and private, above and below ground. City identities are fluid, too. The novels problematize the notion of gender, presenting it as something created through a repetition of stylized acts, something we do rather than something we are.⁴¹⁹

The novelists situate their texts in a city with dense levels of history, stacked vertically and waiting to be quarried. These layers can be viewed simultaneously, so time in the city is non-linear. As Peter Ackroyd observes:

Contemporary theorists have suggested that linear time is itself a figment of the human imagination, but London has already anticipated their conclusions.⁴²⁰

⁴¹⁸ Mark Turner Backward Glances (London: Reaction, 2003) 45-6.

⁴¹⁹ See Judith Butler, Gender Trouble (New York: Routledge, 1999).

⁴²⁰ Peter Ackroyd, London, The Biography (London: Chatto and Windus, 2000) 2.

Just as the city is multilayered, so are the narratives. A number of the novels mirror Walter Benjamin's Arcades Project, with the reader forced to approach them as three-dimensional, weaving their way back and forth through the text and creating new narratives. The work of Bartlett, in particular, fits Roland Barthes' description of a postmodern text which asks the reader to collaborate.⁴²¹ Bartlett's novels require the reader to engage in a dialogue with the texts which resist the notion of closure.

All three novelists employ *and* subvert traditional narrative genres, such as the Victorian sensation novel in Fingersmith, crime and fairytale in Skin Lane and romance in Ready to Catch Him. They people their novels with characters who would traditionally have been invisible in such texts.

Focussing on issues of importance to post-modern literature, the authors are self-consciously aware of the difficulties of writing history and pose the question of whether anything can be objectively known historically. They can be considered alongside Linda Hutcheon's theories of historiographic metafiction, which 'refutes the view that only history has a truth claim'⁴²², and Hayden White's contention that historical narratives are 'verbal fictions'⁴²³

⁴²¹ Roland Barthes, Image, Music, Text, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977) 163.

⁴²² Linda Hutcheon, A Poetics of Postmodernism: history, theory, fiction (London: Routledge, 1988) 93.

⁴²³ Hayden White, Tropics of Discourse: essays in cultural criticism (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1978) 82.

Waters, Bartlett and Hollinghurst give licence to the imagination in their re-telling of history's missing stories. Jeanette Winterson has argued that fictions of the past are as valid as any traditional, official histories. Writers of historical fiction are trustworthy, she claims:

But it's the trustworthiness of the unreliable narrator, in that nobody is going to pretend that this is objectivity. Nobody is going to say, 'This is how life is.' The writer will say, 'Here's a possibility, here's a set of clues, here's a pattern which may or may not be useful to you.' And in those hesitations and gestures, I think, we come closer to a truth than in any possible kind of documentary objectivity.⁴²⁴

⁴²⁴ Margaret Reynolds & Jonathan Noakes, Jeanette Winterson, The Essential Guide (London: Vintage, 2003) 21.

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